

## Motivations of Semantic Change In Contemporary Indonesian Slang

Arief Armedi<sup>1</sup>, Hermayani Friska Uli Purba<sup>2</sup>, Nia Mutia Nasution<sup>3</sup>,  
Sabrina Amanda<sup>4</sup>, Theofany Erlim Limbong<sup>5</sup>, Meisuri<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6</sup>Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

Email: [armedi.2233220030@mhs.unimed.ac.id](mailto:armedi.2233220030@mhs.unimed.ac.id)<sup>1</sup>,  
[hermayanipurbaa@mhs.unimed.ac.id](mailto:hermayanipurbaa@mhs.unimed.ac.id)<sup>2</sup>, [niamutianst.2232520004@mhs.unimed.ac.id](mailto:niamutianst.2232520004@mhs.unimed.ac.id)<sup>3</sup>,  
[sabrinamanda.2233220021@mhs.unimed.ac.id](mailto:sabrinamanda.2233220021@mhs.unimed.ac.id)<sup>4</sup>,  
[theofanyel.2233220028@mhs.unimed.ac.id](mailto:theofanyel.2233220028@mhs.unimed.ac.id)<sup>5</sup>, [meisuriw@yahoo.com](mailto:meisuriw@yahoo.com)<sup>6</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates semantic shifts in twenty Indonesian slang expressions used by Generation Z on X. Using Andreas Blank's motivational theory, qualitative analysis reveals that cognitive association (28%) and expressivity (24%) are the primary drivers of meaning change. The findings demonstrate that slang development is a systematic response to communicative needs, providing a foundation for understanding linguistic evolution and social behavior in digital environments.

Keywords: Semantic, Semantic Change, Blank, Social Media

### INTRODUCTION

Language transformation is no longer a slow, historical process; in the digital age, it often occurs with startling immediacy. In online environments, meanings are not static but emerge dynamically through repetition and contextual adaptation. This fluidity suggests that semantic value is not just stored within words but is continuously reshaped by how speakers utilize them in evolving social spaces.

In the Indonesian context, Generation Z's connection with platforms such as X (previously Twitter) is a significant driver of these changes. Slang terms like *gas*, *anjay*, and *literally* lose their original lexical definitions as a result of memes, trends, and quick responses. Instead, they are repurposed to serve pragmatic and expressive purposes, with a minor change in usage eventually becoming the accepted norm within the digital community.

Despite the seemingly chaotic nature of these changes, semantic shifts are rarely arbitrary. According to Andreas Blank (1999), semantic change is driven by identifiable "motivations"—cognitive, communicative, or socio-cultural factors that prompt speakers to modify language for the sake of efficiency, expressiveness, or social alignment. However, traditional semantic studies often focus on long-term historical data, leaving a gap in our understanding of the high-velocity, fragmented discourse prevalent on modern social media.

This study fills this gap by evaluating twenty Indonesian slang terms commonly used by Generation Z on X. The study identifies a gap between surface-level detection of "changed" meanings and a deeper understanding of why these changes occur. Using Blank's approach and contemporary data, this study aims to clarify how motivations such as humor, exaggeration, and group identity manifest in linguistic behavior, modifying the structure and context of modern slang. Based on these considerations, this research is guided by the following questions:

1. What types of motivations are present in the selected slang expressions?
2. How do these motivations linguistically reflect the usage of the slang?

Theoretically, this study aims to modernize semantic theory by applying it to digital discourse. Practically, it demonstrates that slang development is a systematic, motivated phenomenon, providing a foundation for future sociolinguistic research into the evolution of Indonesian digital language. By narrowing the scope to specific linguistic behaviors, the analysis can more effectively identify how these cognitive and social needs are reflected in the shifting nature of Indonesian slang.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Semantic change

Communication is the foundation of human society, acting as a bridge that facilitates the fluid interchange of complicated information via structured linguistic units. Within this concept, language is viewed as a living entity that changes through a process known as semantic transformation. This process involves the changing, expansion, or limiting of a word's conventional meaning throughout time. In contemporary linguistics, this evolution is viewed as a natural progression of semiotic systems, rather than a sequence of blunders. When society enters the digital era, the rate of change has quickened, particularly when words are liberated from their old moorings and repurposed to satisfy the needs of instant interpersonal interaction and shared cultural experiences.

The shift of meaning is managed by certain linguistic mechanisms that keep language functional while adjusting to new situations. Scholars believe that semantic shift is a common ground in linguistics because it reflects the intrinsic flexibility of human mind. These alterations are not wholly arbitrary; rather, they are founded in pragmatic language use, in which speakers use current lexical resources to communicate novel concepts or emotional states. This process is frequently gradual, beginning with a metaphoric or metonymic expansion by a small group of speakers before being widely accepted throughout the speech community. As a result, the study of semantic change offers insight into how human thought processes categorize the environment and how those categories vary in response to technological, social, and cultural changes.

### B. Motivations for semantic change

The emergence of new meaning is rarely a random occurrence; instead, it is driven by what Andreas Blank (1999) identifies as a cognitive typology of motivations. Blank posits that speakers are active agents in linguistic evolution, modifying meanings to fulfill specific communicative needs through six primary drivers:

- 1) **Expressivity:** Speakers often feel that standard vocabulary lacks the necessary "punch" to convey the intensity of an emotion or situation. By shifting a word's meaning, they create more vivid, emphatic communication.
- 2) **Cognitive Motivation:** This involves the human tendency to categorize new or abstract concepts using familiar, concrete terms. Metaphor and metonymy are key tools here, allowing speakers to bridge the gap between known and unknown experiences.
- 3) **Social Motivation:** Language is a badge of identity. Meanings shift as groups—particularly youth subcultures—seek to create a shared "code" that distinguishes "insiders" from "outsiders," fostering a sense of belonging.
- 4) **Playfulness:** Often, semantic change is the result of linguistic creativity and humor. Speakers manipulate language for fun, using irony or exaggeration to engage their audience in a more entertaining way.
- 5) **Taboo Avoidance:** When certain words become socially uncomfortable or "too heavy," speakers shift the meanings of neutral words to act as euphemisms, allowing them to discuss sensitive topics without social friction.
- 6) **Economy:** In fast-paced environments like digital chat, there is a pressure to communicate more with less. Words are often repurposed into shorter, versatile "tokens" that cover multiple pragmatic functions efficiently.

Recent scholarship between 2022 and 2025 has expanded upon these foundations, particularly in the realm of digital discourse. Contemporary studies on Indonesian "Jaksel" English-lexified slang and social media registers demonstrate that semantic change is a deliberate response to the "context collapse" of platforms like X. Scholars such as Pratama (2023) and Sari (2024) have found that the motivation for *economy*—shortening complex emotional states into single, versatile tokens—dominates Gen Z communication. Furthermore, research into "semantic bleaching" suggests that words frequently lose their intense original meaning to become pragmatic markers. This aligns with Blank's assertion that language change is a tool for social alignment. By adopting new meanings, speakers signal their membership within a specific digital subculture, transforming the lexicon into a badge of contemporary social relevance.

Slang is a profound manifestation of word and language evolution that serves as a mirror for how society behaves through communication. Recent essays by researchers like Wijaya (2022) and Thompson (2025) support this by illustrating that semantic shifts are the result of collective social negotiation. When a community collectively decides that a word carries a new weight, they are essentially rewriting the social contract of their language. Therefore, the "motivation" Blank describes is not just an individual cognitive spark but a communal behavioral shift. The study of these

motivations reveals the underlying values of the speakers—prioritizing speed, emotional resonance, and peer-group solidarity over the rigid adherence to historical lexical standards.

### C. Slang and language innovation

Slang represents the vanguard of language innovation, acting as a laboratory where semantic change occurs in real-time. It emerges from the fringes of "standard" speech, often within youth subcultures or marginalized groups, before percolating into the mainstream. This emergence is characterized by a high degree of creativity and metaphorical extension, where speakers "hijack" existing words to serve immediate, context-dependent needs. In the digital landscape, the lifecycle of slang is compressed; a word can undergo a full semantic shift—from its original meaning to a slang term and finally to a normalized pragmatic marker—within a matter of months. This rapid turnover reflects the "liquid" nature of modern society, where identities and trends are constantly being rebranded and renegotiated.

The role of slang in society is fundamentally about identity and boundary-setting. By utilizing innovative meanings, speakers distinguish their "in-group" from the "out-group," creating a shared linguistic code that fosters intimacy and solidarity. Slang directly reflects the idea of semantic change because it is, by definition, an intentional departure from the established norm. It proves that meaning is a social construct that depends entirely on the consensus of the users. As noted by sociolinguists like Meyerhoff (2023) and the theoretical frameworks of Blank, slang is the most visible evidence of linguistic "agency." It shows that speakers are not passive recipients of a fixed dictionary but are active participants in the ongoing construction of their cultural reality.

Ultimately, the trajectory of slang confirms that it is the ultimate reflection of social behavior. The transition of terms like *anjay* or *literally* in Indonesian discourse is not a sign of linguistic decay but an adaptation to a world that demands hyper-expressive and socially-coded communication. As society becomes more fragmented and mediated by digital screens, the need for slang that can convey tone, irony, and belonging becomes paramount. Thus, slang serves as a living record of social history; it tracks the shifts in what a society finds humorous, what it finds taboo, and how it seeks to connect in an increasingly fast-paced world. To study slang is to study the heartbeat of social evolution itself, proving that the way we change our words is exactly how we change our ways of being together.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### A. Research design

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate semantic shift in modern Indonesian slang. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because the goal is to evaluate and explain meaning alterations rather than

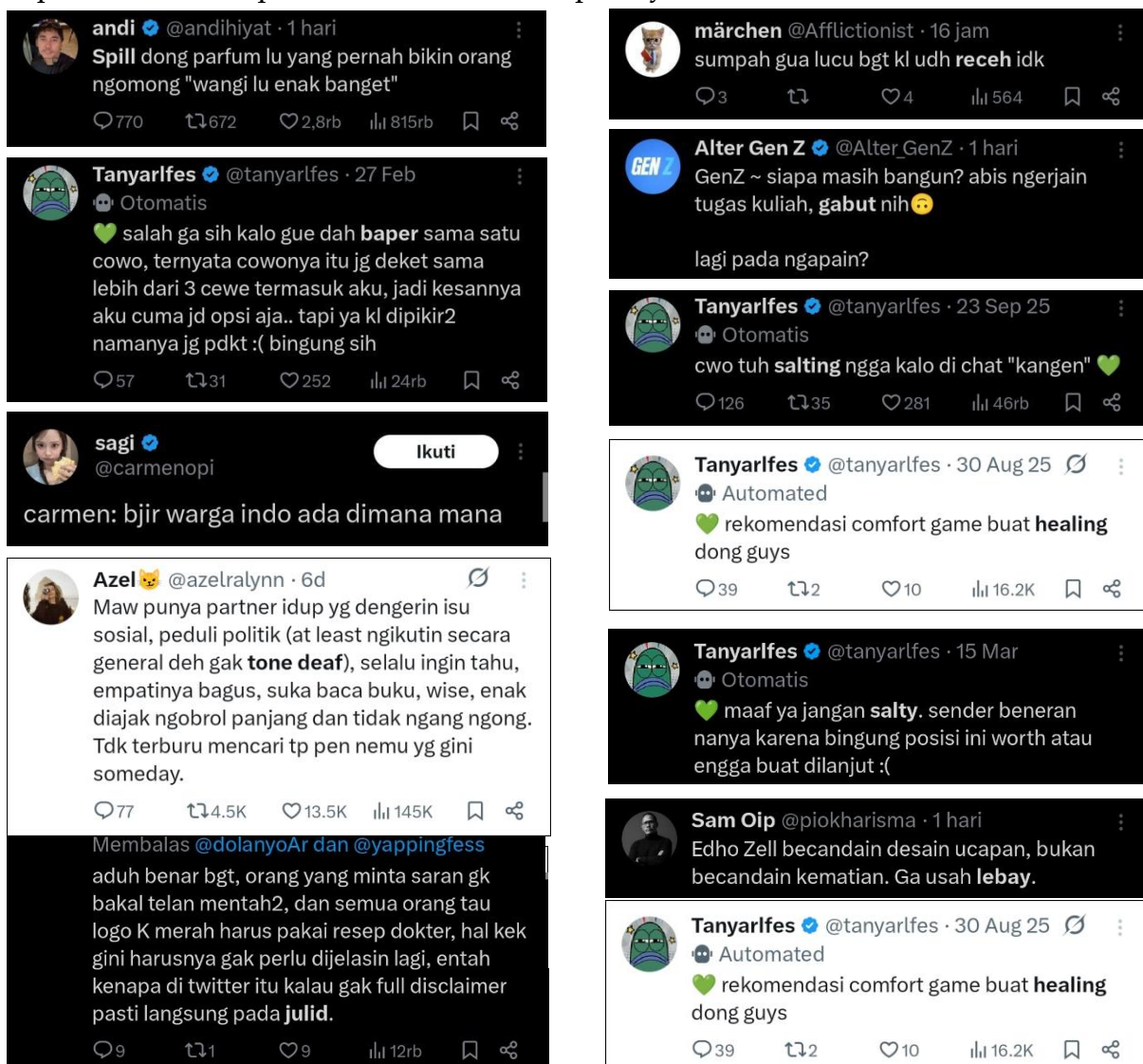
quantify them scientifically. The study aims to determine the motivations for semantic shift in selected slang terms.

The approach is based on Andreas Blank's motivational theory, which explains how semantic change occurs as a result of communication demands such expressivity, cognitive association, social identification, playfulness, taboo avoidance, and linguistic economy. Using this approach, the study seeks to explain why particular slang phrases acquire new meanings in informal communication environments.

B. Data source

The data for this study consist of contemporary Indonesian slang words that demonstrate semantic change from their original meanings. The slang expressions are commonly used in informal communication, particularly in online platforms that is "X" or previously known as "Twitter"

A total of twenty slang words are selected as the data for this study. Examples include expressions such as gabut, anjay, gila, receh, and sultan. These words were chosen because they illustrate clear shifts from their original meanings to new expressive or metaphorical uses in contemporary discourse.





### C. Data Collection

Purposive sampling was used to acquire the data, which involved selecting slang terms that demonstrated semantic shift on purpose. The study initially identified regularly used Indonesian slang phrases in digital communication, such as social media platforms, online forums, and informal online talks.

After selecting suitable slang expressions, the researcher chose twenty words that had significant changes between their original and current slang meanings. The meanings of the original forms were determined using standard Indonesian dictionaries and linguistic references, whilst the slang meanings were discovered through their use in modern discourse.

A sample of twenty slang terms was deemed enough for a small-scale qualitative investigation. The goal of qualitative linguistic research is to investigate patterns of meaning change in selected cases rather than the full population of lexical items. As a result, the chosen words show clear semantic modifications from their original meanings and are commonly employed in modern informal language. This number enables the researcher to thoroughly examine each case while also discovering patterns in the motivations driving semantic shift.

### D. Data Analysis

The data were evaluated using qualitative semantic analysis based on Andreas Blank's motivational theory. The analysis was carried out in numerous steps.

First, the researcher determined the original meaning of each picked word using dictionary definitions and linguistic references. Second, the current slang meaning of each phrase was investigated through its use in modern communication scenarios. Third, the contrasts between the original and current meanings were examined to discover the semantic shift that had happened.

Finally, each semantic shift was analyzed using Blank's motivational categories, including expressivity, cognitive association, social identification, playfulness, taboo avoidance, and linguistic economy. Through this process, the study aims to explain the underlying motivations that contribute to the development of new meanings in Indonesian slang expressions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Full analysis table

No	Slang	Original → Slang Meaning	Motivation
1	Gabut	<i>gaji buta</i> → bored	Economy + Social
2	Anjay	<i>anjing</i> → exclamation	Taboo + Expressivity
3	Spill	reveal → share info/gossip	Cognitive
4	Baper	<i>bawa perasaan</i> → sensitive	Economy
5	Salty	salty taste → annoyed	Cognitive
6	Bjirr	variant of insult → surprise	Taboo + Expressivity
7	Ghosting	disappearing → cutting contact	Cognitive
8	Salting	<i>salah tingkah</i> → awkward	Economy + Playfulness
9	Santuy	<i>santai</i> → relaxed	Playfulness
10	Kepo	busybody → curious	Social
11	Mantul	<i>mantap betul</i> → very good	Economy + Expressivity
12	Lebay	excessive → overdramatic	Expressivity
13	Julid	envious → hateful	Social
14	Gila	insane → amazing	Expressivity
15	Sultan	ruler → rich person	Cognitive
16	Sabi	<i>bisa</i> → can/do it	Playfulness
17	Receh	coins → trivial humor	Cognitive
18	Tone deaf	musical inability → insensitive	Cognitive
19	Slay	kill → impress	Expressivity
20	Healing	recovery → self-care/travel	Cognitive

B. Frequency Table

Motivation	Frequency	Percentage	Slang Examples
<b>Cognitive Association / Metaphor</b>	7	28.0%	spill, salty, ghosting, sultan, receh, tone deaf, healing
<b>Expressivity</b>	6	24.0%	anjay, bjirr, mantul, lebay, gila, slay
<b>Economy</b>	4	16.0%	gabut, baper, mantul, salting
<b>Playfulness</b>	3	12.0%	santuy, salting, sabi
<b>Social Motivation</b>	3	12.0%	gabut, kepo, julid
<b>Taboo Avoidance</b>	2	8.0%	anjay, bjirr

Analysis of motivating frequency is critical for understanding semantic change because it reveals which language processes have the most influence on meaning development. This study assesses the relative value of each motivator based on their distribution. Following Andreas Blank's concept, this technique enables the debate to systematically explain how frequency patterns reflect broader trends in contemporary Indonesian slang.

**Cognitive Association / Metaphor (28%)**

Cognitive association is the most common motivation, showing that semantic change in modern Indonesian slang is predominantly driven by conceptual reinterpretation. During this process, speakers transfer meanings from concrete or literal domains to more abstract or socially significant contexts. For example, the title sultan has changed from expressing political authority to representing riches, and healing has evolved from medical recuperation to recreational self-care. These shifts reflect the function of metaphor and associative thinking in meaning formation, which involves mapping known concepts onto new experiential contexts. Linguistically, this illustrates that semantic change is strongly related to human cognition, as speakers use shared conceptual frameworks to reinterpret words.

The remarkable frequency of this reason implies that slang evolution is not arbitrary, but rather follows known patterns of mental extension. Thus, cognitive association is a key method by which speakers negotiate new meanings, allowing language to adapt to changing social situations while remaining interpretable.

**Expressivity (24%)**

Expressivity is the second most common motivator, emphasizing the importance of emotional communication in slang usage. This motive entails transforming lexical objects into statements that communicate significant emotions, attitudes, or judgments. Words like *gila*, *slay*, and *mantul* demonstrate how meanings change from literal or descriptive to expressive and evaluative roles. Linguistically, this represents a process of subjectification, in which meaning is concentrated on the speaker's emotional state rather than objective reference. Expressivity-driven semantic alterations often entail intensification or reversal, allowing speakers to highlight appreciation, surprise, or excitement.

The proportional frequency of this motivation suggests that modern slang is an important resource for affective communication, especially in informal and digital environments. As a result, language is used not only to convey information but also to perform emotional and interpersonal functions, reinforcing the role of expressivity in shaping semantic change.

**Economy (16%)**

Linguistic economy represents a moderate but substantial incentive, showing speakers' preference for communicative efficiency. This motive involves mechanisms like brevity, clipping, and compression, which reduce lengthier phrases to shorter, more manageable forms. Examples like *baper* (*bawa perasaan*) and *gabut* (*gaji buta*) show how complicated phrases can be simplified into succinct lexical items with specific meanings. Over time, these abbreviated variants undergo semantic stability and may acquire meanings that differ slightly from their original formulations. Linguistically, this process emphasizes language's adaptable nature in response to communication stresses, especially in fast-paced situations like online engagement.

The presence of economy as a recurring motivation suggests that semantic change is influenced not only by meaning but also by form, as speakers seek to optimize linguistic efficiency. Consequently, economy contributes to both the structural simplification and semantic innovation of slang expressions.

### **Playfulness (12%)**

Playfulness contributes to semantic change by emphasizing creativity and stylistic variation in language use. This motivation involves deliberate manipulation of phonological or morphological forms to produce novel and engaging expressions. Words such as *santuy* and *sabi* exemplify how standard forms are altered to create informal and humorous variants. These changes often do not significantly alter the core meaning but instead enhance the expressive and aesthetic quality of the word. Linguistically, playfulness reflects the flexibility of language, as speakers experiment with form to achieve particular social or communicative effects. The moderate frequency of this motivation indicates that creativity is an important, though not dominant, factor in slang development. Playful formations are often associated with youth culture and digital communication, where innovation and originality are highly valued. As such, playfulness contributes to the dynamic and evolving nature of slang by introducing variation and reinforcing informal linguistic practices.

### **Social Motivation (12%)**

Social motivation accounts for a portion of semantic change by reflecting the role of language in expressing social relationships and group identity. Slang expressions such as *kepo* and *julid* are used to evaluate behavior and signal attitudes within a community. These words carry social meanings that extend beyond their literal definitions, functioning as tools for interpersonal judgment and categorization. Linguistically, this demonstrates that semantic change can be influenced by social dynamics, as speakers adapt language to align with group norms and cultural expectations. The moderate frequency of this motivation suggests that while social factors are important, they are not the primary drivers of semantic innovation in slang. Instead, they operate alongside other motivations to shape meaning in context. Socially motivated changes highlight the role of language as a marker of identity and belonging, reinforcing the connection between linguistic variation and social interaction.

### **Taboo Avoidance (8%)**

Social motivation accounts for a portion of semantic change by reflecting the role of language in expressing social relationships and group identity. Slang expressions such as *kepo* and *julid* are used to evaluate behavior and signal attitudes within a community. These words carry social meanings that extend beyond their literal definitions, functioning as tools for interpersonal judgment and categorization. Linguistically, this demonstrates that semantic change can be influenced by social dynamics, as speakers adapt language to align with group norms and cultural expectations. The moderate frequency of this motivation suggests that while social factors are important, they are not

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## CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that Indonesian slang evolution on X is a systematic, non-arbitrary process driven primarily by cognitive association and expressivity. These shifts mirror the rapid behavioral changes of digital society, where language functions as a tool for identity and emotional resonance. Ultimately, slang acts as a living record of social history, reflecting how contemporary communities negotiate meaning through communication.

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