

The Language of Belonging: Gen Z Slang, Digital Communication and Social Inclusion among Students with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Language does not just facilitate the exchange of information; it is also a way in which people form their identity, relate to each other, negotiate positions in society and feel a sense of belonging. The slang and code-mixing, the memes, the emojis and the constantly evolving expressions are important linguistic tools for Generation Z, who create part of their life around social network usage and who are accustomed to living in a world that is largely mediated by technology. Meanwhile, students with disabilities are still faced with social and communicative obstacles in the educational setting. This paper explores the connection between Gen Z's language usage and the social inclusion of students with disabilities. The paper draws on some insights from sociolinguistic theories of identities, digital discourse and disability studies to suggest that today's youth language can be simultaneously a tool for inclusion and a tool for exclusion. The use of Gen Z slang can foster intimacy, unity, laughter and group identity, but also may present challenges for students with communication, sensory, cognitive or social impediments, due to its rapidity of change, its cultural specificity, and its reliance on the digital context. The paper thus suggests that the informal digital language should not be considered as linguistic degradation and should be approached as a new form of language. Rather, teachers should acquire linguistic flexibility and the skills of digital literacy and code switching and make sure students with disabilities are engaged in decisions around communication practices. The paper argues for the recognition of different communicative registers, and for providing environments where students can engage in a conversation in the formality of the formal language without giving up their identity.

Keywords: Gen Z, Slang, Digital Communication, Disability, Inclusive Education

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Introduction

Society evolves, and so does language. Each generation forms its own linguistic preferences, which correspond to the social, cultural, technological and interaction contexts of the generation. Generation Z is unique in this way, as a lot of their communications have taken place in digitally mediated environments. Social media, messaging apps, short videos, online communities, gaming areas, and meme cultures have set the scene in which words can get buzzed around rather quickly and gain new significance. Some expressions might have meanings that go beyond the dictionary definitions of the words, like *slay*, *rizz*, *delulu*, *no cap* or *ghosting*, *based*, *IYKYK*, and *it's giving*. Modern studies refer to Gen Z slang as a tool through which they build their identity, interact with others, and even play jokes on them, as well as a way to communicate a sense of belonging together.

Language and belonging issues take on special significance in the educational context. Schools and Universities are more than just spaces for the transmission of academic knowledge; they are also sites of social interaction, where students form friendships, negotiate their identities and attempt to gain recognition from fellow students. Studies of children with special educational needs and disabilities have consistently shown that one does not automatically equate with the other - that is, being physically included in a mainstream classroom setting does not mean being socially included in the mainstream classroom. Some recent research has looked at the role of the peer relationship, social behaviour, participation in shared activities and social self-perception as core dimensions of social participation that students with special educational needs face (Liu et al.).

This is important to grasp with respect to language. One's physical location in a classroom can be "socially peripheral" if the communicative practices the groups use to interact are inaccessible or unfamiliar. On the other hand, shared language use might help pupils to make new friendships and feel more at home. Numerous research studies with students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms have also

identified the significance of friendship and peer acceptance from the students' point of view (de Boer et al.).

The intersection of Gen Z language, digital communication and disability inclusion is therefore an area of interest that has not been widely studied, and that is the focus of this paper. The paper does not take it for granted that slang is 'good' or 'bad' but focuses on the situations in which it might enhance or impede social involvement. The main thesis is that the language of Gen Z should be seen as a sociolinguistic practice in which young people establish their identity and relationships, and inclusive education should make sure that the language of young people with disabilities can also be used in the process of establishing identity and relationships.

1. Gen Z Language and the Changing Nature of Communication

There is no fixed set of slang words for the language of the Generation.-Z. Rather, it is seen as a set of flexible language practices which are influenced by digital context, peer groups, popular culture, multilingualism and platform-specific communication. The most recent research on Gen Z language on TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp has found that slang, abbreviations, semantic changes, code mixing and more are key aspects of the way people interact with language in today's digital era.

The phenomenon is well illustrated and has received a major theoretical underpinning from work by David Crystal on Internet language. The Internet, then, is an "electronic, global, and interactive medium" that necessarily affects the forms of language that arise in it, argues Crystal (26). Its form is determined by the possibilities and limitations of the medium itself.

This is why so many abbreviations like LOL, OMG, IDK, BTW, lowercase letters, repeated letters and multimodal expressions are in use and why so many emojis and GIFs are used. In the digital world, users are encouraged to use verbal, visual and symbolic resources. Defining meaning can consequently be based on words, grammar,

but also on context, timing, visual presentation, shared cultural background and conventions of the platform.

Previous studies about teenage instant messaging contradict the belief that informal language is the downfall of language skills. The findings are important because they show that instant messaging can represent language adaptation (not language failure), in the study of over one million words of instant messaging produced by seventy-two teens (3).

The difference is particularly noteworthy in terms of Gen Z, as terms like *slay* or *rizz* might seem strange from the outside looking in, but do not necessarily mean the same thing as they will from within the conversation. A slang expression can also express evaluation, humour, intimacy, irony, affiliation or emotional stand.

This is a reading that has been confirmed in recent years by scholarship. Research on Gen Z slang on TikTok indicates that slang is a way of signalling “identity, creativity, and group affiliation,” and research on Instagram indicates that abbreviations and slang can serve as a group identification signpost. When considering Gen Z slang, as well as meaning, it is important to consider what social work a word is performing.

2. Language, Identity and Belonging

Language-identity is a key relation in the field of sociolinguistics. In Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall's view, an individual's identity is not innate, but is a product of interaction. They claim that,

“identity is not a source of linguistic and other semiotic practices, it is the product” (Bucholtz and Hall 586).

This is a very handy one to use when you're analyzing slang used by Gen Z. The use of a specific expression by a young person may not just be one in which they are showing they know a new word. The expression can situate that person in a certain peer group, online social network, cultural environment, or generation. Language, then, is an implicit saying of “I

understand this,” “I belong here,” or “I share this cultural reference with you.”

For children with disabilities, the sense of belonging is particularly important as education inclusion does not just refer to access to physical classrooms. Students might need opportunities to engage in social interactions, make friendships and be represented outside of the identity of people with disabilities. In their study of youth with disabilities in India, Naraian and Natarajan discovered that students were very keen on joining peer groups, but struggled to be portrayed in anything other than an individual in need of support.

Language can thus be a field of negotiation of identity. When a student is always the one who receives help and never the one who gives, it may be a different way to get social recognition in the form of linguistic participation. A joke, a meme, a familiar expression or an in-group chat can help a student to take on the role of a friend, a classmate, a fan, a gamer, a creator, or a peer, rather than being defined solely as a student with a disability.

This view also reflects disability-rights theories and practices, which focus on participation and self-representation. The principle “nothing about us, without us” is a powerful statement of the disability rights of the person and is often used in relation to the person's use of language, and in relation to decisions about what forms of language are appropriate for the person with disabilities. Pupils need to be given opportunities to talk about their experiences of inclusion/exclusion in communicative practices.

Slang has always been used in an informal way and generally among members of a group. However, in the digital culture of Gen Z, its roles are becoming more and more multi-modal and situated. One word can imply an assessment, a feeling response, a punch-line, and a speaker's attitude towards a speaker at one time.

Let's take the last two terms of the expression into account: *no cap*. As a literal, it is of little use to someone not familiar with the modern vernacular. However, in a specific situation or

context, it could be a sign of sincerity or emphasis. Likewise, its sharing can invite an evaluative comparison, and IYKYK sets up an insider relationship among those who share the pertinent cultural information. These expressions are not merely abbreviations of the formal language, but have their own distinct meaning. They can be used for social relations encoding.

This is significant for inclusion as belonging is sometimes based on cultural symbols. Digital communication can enable disabled students to be able to access communities that may not be easily available to them physically. In the study "Digital media as opportunities for social relations – and as reproducing forms of exclusions", Kaur and Saukko outline how digital media offer opportunities for social relations, but can also reproduce forms of exclusions among young people with disabilities. They take the idea of "social access" to reflect the connection between the affordances of the technology, the relationships that develop online, and social life offline.

The potential of digital language is also there in the research about disability identity on the Web. Tollan's research in the emerging field of young creators on Instagram explores how disabled young people construct their identity and own experience through the use of social media. Social media can thus offer opportunities in which a disabled young person is not just represented for, but represents themselves.

Gen Z slang can help in this regard, as it can help youth with disabilities join the informal communication culture of their peers. A student who can use a meme, emoji, a popular expression or reference can engage in interaction not defined as "primarily by disability."

But slang should be avoided, as it should not be romanticized. The common language can be the basis for unity, but it can also divide people into "insiders" and "outsiders." All speech communities draw lines, and linguistic knowledge can also be used as a type of social capital. If a student is unaware of the expressions of the peer group he or she is a part of, he or she might not

be able to join in, even though he or she is physically there.

3. When Digital Language Becomes a Barrier

Language can be a means of exclusion as well as a means of inclusion. Gen Z communicators are often very fast, context-driven, ironic and multimodal. The meaning(s) might rely on cultural understanding, which cannot be deduced from the literal meaning of the text.

This poses unique issues of concern for special education. Autistic, intellectually disabled, language-processing disordered, hearing-impaired, dyslexic or other communication-difference students are not one group of language. They have varying communicative needs, and we would never presume to make generalisations about the experience of slang for all students with disabilities.

Some students may not be able to process or interpret rapidly changing expressions. For some, digital communication will be even more accessible than in person, as it gives them the time to think through what they're saying, to read it again and again, and ways to communicate it differently. In this sense, disability should not be considered a lack, in relation to digital language, automatically.

This is where the social approach to disability is helpful. By focusing on the obstacles created by social structures, as opposed to an overly individualized perspective, Mike Oliver's formulation of the social model is useful. The model suggests that there are restrictions based on prejudice/discrimination, inaccessible education and exclusionary arrangements (Oliver).

With regards to communication with Gen Z, it is more of a question of: What communicative environment are we creating, and does it give multiple ways of participating?

For instance, a group conversation that uses only slang that is changing a lot may exclude a student who is not familiar with the slang. However, if the student can discuss a word or phrase not

understood, incorporate multiple modes of communication (auditory and visual), provide context, and use more than one register, then the same environment may be more accessible.

But whether or not slang should be removed is not the issue. Rather, inclusive communication must be flexible regarding the language.

There are three types of English: Formal English, Gen Z English, and Code-Switching.

It is very helpful in education to develop code-switching and register awareness in dealing with the language of Gen Z. Pupils should be aware that there are a variety of different contexts in which language is used and different ways in which it is expressed.

The same register doesn't have to be used in a WhatsApp conversation with friends, a classroom discussion, an academic essay, a job interview or a presentation. Thus, it is better to be able to use different levels of English than to stick with one form of English in all situations.

Studies on the digital language of Gen Z have also highlighted the need to consider informal digital language and formal language in the academic context. The use of code switching and register awareness is important for pedagogical considerations, as recent scholarship has evidenced that young people often switch between the informal use of digital language and the formal use of educational language.

In this way, a negative attitude towards young people's language is also prevented. Rather than dismissing students as using "words that are not correct," it may be helpful to have students determine the communicative purpose of the various linguistic options.

Students could make comparisons such as:

"Yeah, that was a good presentation, mate."

with:

"The presentation was very good as it clearly presented the argument and had appropriate evidence."

The first sentence is suitable in some situations that are informal and within a peer group; the

second sentence is more suitable for academic writing. These should not be interpreted as a testament to the lack of language skills of either of them. The key competence is the ability to be aware of the situations, contexts and reasons for using each register.

This distinction will be especially beneficial for students with disabilities. Students might be assessed largely by conforming to the formal English if it is taught as the only acceptable variety of English. Using informal language as a standard for all students to use may result in students not learning the registers they need for academic and professional purposes. An inclusive linguistic pedagogy is thus one that should give access to both of these.

4. Digital Communication and Alternative Forms of Participation

Digital communication also has a very broadened concept of language. Social media communication often uses textual, image, emoticon, GIFs, sound, video, hashtags and other semiotic resources. This is a multimodal approach, which brings alternative opportunities to participate.

The study of multimodal storytelling with neurodiversity learners has recently focused on the connection between multimodal storytelling and engagement, social belonging and oral communication. Ma & Hashemifardnia's study suggests that multimodal could be important in relation to engagement and social belonging in inclusive education.

"Digital media have enabled people with disabilities (PWDs) to connect with each other"
(Kaur and Saukko 420).

This means that "slang language" shouldn't be the only thing that is discussed with regard to Gen Z language. A more expansive definition of 'digital vernacular' is better. Words are not the only elements of a digital vernacular – it also contains memes, images, reactions, hashtags, punctuation, typography, audio and video. Multimodal communication can be a means for students with

disabilities to gain other avenues of access to peer interactions.

Accessibility needs to be at the core, all the time. Some students may have processing or literacy issues that hinder their ability to access a communication system that is primarily text-based; some students with visual impairments may find a primarily audio communication system less accessible; some students with processing or literacy differences may find a fast communication system with a high percentage of text less accessible. Digital inclusion is not something that can be done simply through the implementation of technology. The technology and communicative practices, and their uses, need to be accessible as well.

5. The Problem of “Gen Z Language”

The term itself, “Gen Z language”, needs to be explored. It is easy to think of a generation Z as linguistically uniform and having a set of words. But this is complicated by sociolinguistic studies of the contemporary period. Language is a product of geographical, class, ethnic, multilingual, platform, age, community and cultural affiliation.

Recently, studies have been conducted specifically that question the moniker of “Gen Z language” or “TikTok language” as a language system all on its own. It is significant that many expressions linked to the culture of Gen Z have histories that extend beyond Gen Z and may be connected to specific linguistic/cultural communities.

So it is important for teachers not to introduce social media slang as common slang for the Gen Z generation. Otherwise, this action can lead to the stereotype of a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon.

As with the case of any other area, the same applies to disability. There is no one right way to communicate as a disabled person. Students with disabilities engage in a variety of linguistic repertoires, preferring and identifying with them and having different experiences. But inclusive

research needs to ensure that the term disability is not used as a unified term.

6. Toward an Inclusive Linguistic Pedagogy

Leading the inclusive approach to language with recognition will be the first step. Teachers need not be fluent in all the current slang items themselves, nor do they have to rely on using informal language as the focus of classroom language. Rather, they can recognise that students already have rich linguistic repertoires which can be viewed as the launching points for linguistic education.

A classroom practice that might be used is register comparisons. Students learn to gather samples of the informal digital register and convert them into another register that is appropriate for an academic or professional setting or other context. This makes slang a subject of linguistic study, instead of its adversary, formal language.

There is another way – multimodal participation. Learners may be allowed to express their understanding in a variety of written, spoken, visual and electronic ways as appropriate. This can lead to other ways to get involved with learning without reducing the level of learning.

A third way is explicit references to digital. Using modern topics allows teachers to offer enough context and doesn't rely on students knowing the modern memes or slang. This is especially crucial in multiple classrooms with varying aspects of digital exposure, disability, linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students.

Finally, students with disabilities need to be involved in the planning of communication practices. UNESCO's inclusive education efforts focus on listening to the voice of persons with disabilities and consider them as active agents and not only recipients of educational services.

7. Discussion

Language and disability inclusion is thus best conceptualized as a dynamic interaction between language identity and language accessibility and social participation of persons with disabilities.

Gen Z slang can serve as a language of belonging because it helps bring young people together through reference points; by connecting with others in a way that makes people feel closer and more identified as a group. Linguistic belonging is not automatic and always inclusive, however. All of those who understand a language can be part of the code, and not all of those who don't.

This conflict is most acute for students whose disabilities are a part of their lives. Inclusive education can not be "just school integration." Social participation demands opportunities to communicate and relate with others, to assert their identities and to be recognised as a social being by others. Liu et al.'s study on special education students' social participation has shown that the issue of peer relationships and self-perception of such students is not solely limited to special schools but extends to inclusive schools as well.

The way in which Gen Z is behaving online can be a blessing and a curse. Digital spaces can facilitate disabled youth to build their identity, form communities and social engagement. Meanwhile, online environments can also generate exclusion via user-unfriendly design, quick communication, cultural gatekeeping and expectations of the "normal" way to interact with a user. The idea of social access is of special interest because it eschews seeing digital media as liberating or as harmful.

The consequences have implications beyond just special education. They propose certain general questions as to what educational institutions deem legitimate language. Schools might not consider complex social and pragmatic aspects of the new digital language if they only see formal Standard English as proof of linguistic competence. On the other hand, if teachers do not use any formal language, then pupils might not be able to access academic and professional registers.

Linguistic plurality is thus the more productive way of going about it. Pupils should be taught that language can be used in different ways or that there are different levels of language which can

be used appropriately for effective communication. This way, the students' linguistic identities are honoured, and they have access to other modes of expression.

Conclusion

GEN Z's language is not a set of trendy slang words. It's inherent to a broader shift in communication, identity, friendship and community building among young people in the digital age. Slang, abbreviations, memes, emojis, code-mixing and multimodal communication can be very effective in signifying social belonging.

These linguistic practices can be useful for students with disabilities to interact with their peers and express themselves. Research on disability and digital media shows that the online environment can contribute to the construction of identity and socialization, and research on inclusive education shows that the presence of friends, acceptance and social inclusion are still fundamental.

But the language of Gen Z can't be considered 'all-inclusive'. It can mean different things and require cultural knowledge, quick processing, access to digital and access to certain online communities to participate. The same language, therefore, can have a different effect on different students, either fostering a sense of belonging or excluding a student.

The central educational goal is not to select between 'Gen Z language' and 'correct English'. The focus of education is then not 'Gen Z language' versus 'correct English'. Rather, teachers should be responsible for making students aware of the connection between language, context, identity and power. Providing instruction in code switching, register awareness and multimodal communication, as well as digital literacy, can help students change their linguistic context while preserving their identity.

Above all, students with disabilities need to be identified as members of linguistic culture and not just as those who are the objects of special services. Here, the principle "Nothing about us, without us" is relevant: Inclusive communication should be created with students, not for students.

In this way, there is no single slang vocabulary that is the language of belonging. Making communicative spaces where people can

communicate, write, speak and interact in many ways without having to conform to get a place in the social world.

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