

Digital Slang and English Informal Language in Online Gaming Communities: An Analysis of Virtual Interaction

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ABSTRACT

Online gaming communities have developed a rich and distinctive linguistic system that extends well beyond simple communicative shorthand. Despite growing scholarly interest in internet language and computer-mediated communication, focused analyses of digital slang in gaming contexts particularly in non-Western, multilingual settings remain limited. This study investigates the structural forms, pragmatic functions, and sociolinguistic significance of digital slang and informal English as used within online gaming communities. The research is guided by three questions: (1) What are the structural categories of gaming slang? (2) What pragmatic and social functions does informal gaming language serve? (3) How does gaming language intersect with identity and cultural value in virtual communities? Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through systematic observation of in-game chat interactions across Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, Valorant, and Minecraft platforms, as well as associated Discord servers and Reddit forums, over a period of four months. A corpus of approximately 500 utterances was compiled. Data were analyzed using Crystal's (2021) typology of Netspeak, Herring's (2007) computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) framework, and Gee's (2003) concept of Discourse and social languages. Findings reveal five structural categories of gaming slang abbreviations and acronyms, in-group jargon and neologisms, phonetic and orthographic modification, lexical borrowing and code-switching, and paralinguistic markers each serving overlapping functions of identity signaling, solidarity construction, and social hierarchy management. Gaming slang also demonstrates measurable influence on broader informal English usage beyond the virtual sphere.

Keywords: Online Gaming Language, Digital Slang, Informal English, Computer-Mediated Communication, Virtual Communities, Sociolinguistics

ABSTRAK

Komunitas permainan daring telah mengembangkan sistem linguistik yang kaya dan khas, melampaui sekadar singkatan komunikatif. Meskipun minat akademis terhadap bahasa internet dan komunikasi bermediasi komputer terus berkembang, analisis yang berfokus pada slang digital dalam konteks

permainan, khususnya dalam lingkungan multibahasa non-Barat masih terbatas. Penelitian ini mengkaji bentuk struktural, fungsi pragmatis, dan signifikansi sosiolinguistik dari slang digital dan bahasa Inggris informal yang digunakan dalam komunitas permainan daring. Penelitian ini dipandu oleh tiga pertanyaan: (1) Apa saja kategori struktural slang permainan? (2) Fungsi pragmatis dan sosial apa yang dilayani oleh bahasa permainan informal? (3) Bagaimana bahasa permainan berkaitan dengan identitas dan nilai budaya dalam komunitas virtual? Dengan menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi sistematis terhadap interaksi obrolan dalam permainan di platform Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, Valorant, dan Minecraft, serta server Discord dan forum Reddit terkait, selama empat bulan. Sebuah korpus sekitar 500 ujaran dikompilasi. Data dianalisis menggunakan tipologi Netspeak Crystal (2021), kerangka CMDA Herring (2007), dan konsep Wacana serta bahasa sosial Gee (2003). Temuan mengungkap lima kategori struktural slang permainan singkatan dan akronim, jargon in-group dan neologisme, modifikasi fonetik dan ortografik, peminjaman leksikal dan alih kode, serta penanda paralinguistik yang masing-masing menjalankan fungsi penanda identitas, konstruksi solidaritas, dan manajemen hierarki sosial.

Kata kunci: Bahasa Permainan Daring, Slang Digital, Bahasa Inggris Informal, Komunikasi Bermediasi Komputer, Komunitas Virtual, Sosiolinguistik

A. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital technology and online platforms has fundamentally transformed the nature of human communication. Among the most distinctive manifestations of this transformation is the emergence of specialized linguistic practices within online gaming communities a domain that has attracted millions of participants worldwide and produced its own rich, evolving lexicon. Online multiplayer games such as Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, PUBG, Dota 2, and League of Legends have become not only arenas for competitive play but also vibrant social spaces in which language is invented, shared, and continuously reinvented (Leppänen et al., 2013).

In everyday gaming interaction, players communicate through text chat, voice communication, and shorthand expressions that are often incomprehensible to those outside the community. Terms such as "noob" (a newcomer or unskilled player), "GG" (good game), "AFK" (away from keyboard), and "pwned" (decisively defeated) have become emblematic of a broader linguistic phenomenon that scholars have termed "gaming language" or "gamer talk" (Chik, 2014). This informal register is

not merely a collection of abbreviations; it encodes social norms, communicative expectations, and identity constructions that are central to participation in virtual communities.

The study of language in digital environments has evolved considerably over the past three decades. Crystal (2021) introduced the concept of "Netspeak" to describe the distinctive linguistic variety emerging from internet communication, characterized by abbreviated forms, creative orthography, and a hybrid spoken-written register, arguing that the internet expands the creative possibilities of language rather than corrupting it. Herring (2007) advanced this framework through computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), emphasizing that CMC varies significantly according to medium, context, and community a perspective particularly relevant to gaming contexts, where real-time interaction demands brevity, precision, and social solidarity.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Gee (2003) introduced the notion of "Discourse" to describe how language, identity, and practice are co-constructed within affinity spaces, arguing that gaming communities require participants to acquire specific "social languages" that signal

membership and competence. This resonates with Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice, in which newcomers acquire linguistic and social norms through legitimate peripheral participation. Research on gaming language specifically has grown substantially: Miswaty et al. (2024) identified five principal forms of linguistic innovation in online gaming communities, while Nivas et al. (2015) demonstrated that gaming slang encodes complex meanings efficiently through single words or symbols. AlAfnan (2025) found that gaming language functions as a tool for asserting dominance and fostering inclusivity, and Palmer (2025) traced how internet slang continuously evolves through communal play and shared experience.

Despite this growing body of literature, focused analyses of digital slang in non-Western, multilingual gaming contexts where English functions as a lingua franca alongside local languages remain limited. Previous studies do not sufficiently address how gaming language intersects with identity construction and cultural values in such settings. This study seeks to address that gap. Specifically, it is guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the structural categories of digital slang and informal English in online gaming communities? (2) What pragmatic and social functions does informal gaming language serve in virtual interaction? (3) How does gaming language intersect with questions of identity, community, and cultural value in digital environments?

B. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to investigate the linguistic characteristics and social functions of digital slang and informal English in online gaming communities. A qualitative

approach is particularly suited to this research context, as it enables the researcher to capture language in its natural communicative environment and interpret the social meanings embedded in informal linguistic practices (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative orientation is further supported by the complexity and context-dependence of gaming language, which resists reduction to quantitative categories without loss of interpretive depth.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through systematic observation and documentation of text-based interactions in online gaming environments. The platforms selected for observation included in-game chat channels of popular multiplayer games (Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, Valorant, and Minecraft) and associated online communities on Discord servers and Reddit forums. Data collection took place over a period of four months, during which a corpus of approximately 500 utterances containing identifiable instances of slang, informal expressions, or non-standard English was compiled.

Participants in the observed communities were English-speaking gamers from diverse national backgrounds, reflecting the multilingual reality of global gaming platforms where English functions as the dominant lingua franca. In addition to passive observation, informal interviews were conducted with eight experienced gamers aged 18 to 35 years to elicit metalinguistic awareness of gaming language and its social significance. All data were collected in accordance with ethical guidelines for internet research, with community-generated public posts treated as naturally occurring data and individual identities anonymized.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a multi-layered framework drawing on Crystal's (2021) typology of Netspeak features, Herring's (2007) CMDA framework, and Gee's (2003) concept of Discourse and social languages. Each instance of digital slang or informal expression was identified, coded, and categorized according to its structural type (abbreviation, acronym, neologism, phonetic modification, lexical borrowing, or creative orthography) and its pragmatic function (solidarity marker, efficiency device, identity signal, humor strategy, or power assertion). To assess the social dimensions of gaming language, the analysis also incorporated elements of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, examining how informal expressions function in face-threatening and face-saving acts. The analytical procedure followed three interrelated steps: (1) Identification isolating all instances of non-standard, informal, or slang language within the corpus; (2) Classification categorizing each expression by structural type and assigning it to one or more pragmatic function categories; and (3) Interpretation analyzing the broader social, cultural, and communicative significance of identified patterns within the framework of gaming community norms.

C. Result and Discussion

Result

Structural Categories of Gaming Slang

The analysis of the gaming language corpus revealed five major structural categories of digital slang and informal English, each with distinct linguistic properties and communicative affordances.

a. Abbreviations and Acronyms

The most frequently occurring category consists of abbreviations and

acronyms that enable rapid, efficient communication. Common examples include GG (Good Game), AFK (Away From Keyboard), OP (Overpowered), DPS (Damage Per Second), BM (Bad Manners), and GGWP (Good Game, Well Played). These forms reflect the communicative demands of real-time gaming, where time pressure makes verbose communication impractical (Crystal, 2021). Their deployment signals competence and community membership: using AFK correctly marks familiarity with community norms, while misuse signals outsider status (Miswaty et al., 2024).

b. In-Group Jargon and Neologisms

A second category comprises in-group jargon and neologisms novel words or established words given new, community-specific meanings. Examples include: noob (an inexperienced player), pwned (decisively defeated, derived from a typing error for "owned"), meta (the most effective current strategy), smurf (an expert playing on a low-level account), and tilted (emotionally destabilized by setbacks). These neologisms demonstrate the creative linguistic productivity of gaming communities, which continuously generate new vocabulary to describe shared experiences (Leppänen et al., 2013). The term "pwned" illustrates what Palmer (2025) describes as "ephemeral comedic expressions" that drive lexical innovation online.

c. Phonetic and Orthographic Modification

A third category involves deliberate modification of standard spelling to reflect pronunciation, emotion, or humor. Examples include "rekt" (wrecked), "kek" (a variant of "lol" from World of Warcraft), and number-letter substitutions such as "w8" (wait) or "gr8" (great). These are consistent with Crystal's (2021) "playful" character of Netspeak. Pragmatically, exaggerated

spellings such as "pleaaase" or all-caps ("WHAT ARE YOU DOING") convey emotional intensity and function as digital prosody (Herring, 2007), aligning with Eisenstein's (2015) finding that informal digital speech follows systematic rules for expressing social meaning.

d. Lexical Borrowing and Code-Switching

In multilingual gaming contexts, lexical borrowing and code-switching are prominent features. Players frequently mix English gaming terms with elements of their native languages, producing hybrid utterances. Examples observed in the corpus include Indonesian gamers using "push rank dulu" (let's push our rank first) or "hero ini OP banget" (this hero is really overpowered), seamlessly blending English gaming jargon with Indonesian syntax. This reflects Herring's (2007) observation that CMC functions as a catalyst for cross-linguistic contact and language change.

e. Emoticons, Emoji, and Paralinguistic Markers

The fifth category encompasses emoticons, emoji, and other paralinguistic markers that supplement or replace verbal communication. Examples include ":)" (positive emotion or sarcasm), ":((frustration), and game-specific sticker packs. These elements perform illocutionary functions indicating teasing, consoling, or congratulating without explicit verbalization (Dresner & Herring, 2010).

Table 1. Structural Categories and Functions of Gaming Slang

Category	Examples	Semantic Function	Pragmatic Function	Typical Context
Abbreviations &	GG, AFK, OP,	Communicative efficiency	Identity signaling; in-	In-game chat during

Acronyms	DPS	cy; brevity in high-speed interaction	group membership	match
In-Group Jargon & Neologisms	noob, meta, tilted, smurf	Encodes community-specific concepts and experiences	Solidarity, exclusion, identity ascription	Post-game discussion, team chat
Phonetic & Orthographic Modification	rekt, kek, gr8, gg ez	Expresses emotion, humor, and shared cultural references	Humor; emotional expression; provocation	All chat; taunting opponents
Lexical Borrowing & Code-Switching	push rank dulu, hero OP	Blends English gaming terms with local language structures	Cultural identity negotiation; informal solidarity	Team chat in multilingual servers
Emoticons & Paralinguistic Markers	:), :(, sticker packs	Replaces non-verbal cues absent from written CMC	Emotion display; teasing; consolation	Post-match chat; lobby interaction

Pragmatic Functions of Gaming Slang

Beyond their structural diversity, gaming slang expressions perform a range of overlapping pragmatic functions central to the social organization of gaming communities. The primary function is the construction and signaling of in-group identity (Gee, 2003). Fluent use of slang such as "meta," "gank" (a surprise attack by multiple players), or "camp" marks the speaker as an experienced community member. Conversely, ignorance of such

terms marks a speaker as a "noob," with social consequences including exclusion from team cooperation and verbal mockery.

Gaming slang also functions as a solidarity mechanism, reinforcing bonds between team members. Expressions such as "GG," "nice play," or "ez" following a successful engagement serve as phatic communion language whose primary purpose is social bonding rather than information transfer (Crystal, 2021). Conversely, gaming slang can be weaponized as a tool of exclusion and social aggression. Terms such as "noob," "feeder," or "trash" function as negative identity ascriptions reinforcing social hierarchies, reflecting what Brown and Levinson (1987) describe as face-threatening acts.

Gaming Slang and Identity Construction

Following Gee (2003) and Lave and Wenger (1991), gaming communities can be understood as communities of practice in which shared linguistic repertoires serve as markers of legitimate membership. The acquisition and deployment of gaming slang is thus not merely a communicative act but an identity performance. This is evident in the "digital dialect" formation documented by Miswaty et al. (2024) in PUBG gaming communities, where repeated linguistic habits create stable, recognizable varieties of gaming language.

The data further suggest that gaming slang serves as a medium for expressing cultural values specific to gaming communities, including competitiveness, meritocracy, and valorization of technical skill. The widespread use of terms such as "ranked," "carry," and "clutch" encodes a shared value system in which performance, strategic knowledge, and resilience are highly esteemed.

Gaming Slang and Broader Language Change

A significant finding concerns the relationship between gaming slang and broader language change. Several expressions originating in gaming contexts have undergone lexical diffusion into wider informal English usage. Terms such as "noob," "pwned," "GG," and "level up" are now widely used in non-gaming contexts across social media, casual conversation, and popular media consistent with Crystal's (2021) observation that internet language actively influences broader patterns of language use and with Palmer's (2025) argument that lexical innovation through communal play is a fundamental sociolinguistic process.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with and extend previous research on gaming language and digital communication. Answering the first research question, the five structural categories identified in the present corpus are consistent with the taxonomy proposed by Miswaty et al. (2024), who similarly documented slang terms, abbreviations, lexical borrowing, phonetic modification, and syntactic adaptation in PUBG gaming communities. However, the present study contributes a more nuanced account of the pragmatic functions these forms serve particularly their role in identity signaling and social hierarchy management which was not the primary focus of Miswaty et al.'s (2024) work. Nivas et al. (2015) likewise identified lexical efficiency as a primary function of gaming slang, a finding confirmed here, but the present study extends this by demonstrating that efficiency is inseparable from social and identity functions.

Regarding the second research question on pragmatic functions, the sociolinguistic significance of gaming slang as an identity marker corroborates Gee's (2003) theoretical framework, in which

mastery of a community's "social language" is prerequisite to legitimate participation. This is consistent with AlAfnan's (2025) discourse analysis of online gaming, which found that language functions as a tool for asserting dominance and fostering inclusivity. Unlike AlAfnan's (2025) primary focus on toxic language, the present study provides a more balanced account that foregrounds solidarity-building and identity-constructing functions alongside exclusionary uses.

On the third research question concerning identity and cultural values, the code-switching patterns observed among Southeast Asian gamers extend Herring's (2007) findings on CMC as a catalyst for cross-linguistic contact. This phenomenon is not documented in comparable detail in previous studies such as Nivas et al. (2015), suggesting that multilingual gaming contexts produce distinctive patterns of language use that merit further scholarly attention. The finding that gaming slang diffuses into broader informal English is consistent with Palmer's (2025) corpus linguistics analysis of internet slang evolution, further confirming that online gaming communities are significant agents of contemporary language change. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that gaming language is not merely derivative of broader internet language trends but constitutes a primary site of linguistic innovation with measurable influence on informal English worldwide.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study has examined the structural categories, pragmatic functions, and sociolinguistic significance of digital slang and informal English in online gaming communities. The findings demonstrate that gaming language constitutes a coherent, rule-governed, and socially meaningful linguistic system. Five structural categories

of gaming slang were identified: abbreviations and acronyms, in-group jargon and neologisms, phonetic and orthographic modification, lexical borrowing and code-switching, and paralinguistic markers each serving distinct communicative purposes within the gaming environment. These findings directly answer the three research questions posed in the introduction.

Pragmatically, gaming slang functions as a mechanism of identity construction, in-group solidarity, and social hierarchy management. The study further reveals that gaming slang actively participates in broader processes of language change, with many gaming terms diffusing into wider informal English usage. These findings contribute to the fields of internet linguistics, pragmatics, and the sociolinguistics of virtual communities.

Future studies may extend this inquiry through comparative analysis across different gaming genres or linguistic communities, longitudinal tracking of lexical innovation and diffusion, or investigation of the educational implications of gaming language for English language learning and teaching. It is also suggested that English language educators consider gaming language as a valuable resource for engaging students with contemporary informal English and the dynamics of language change in the digital age.

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