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A Morphological Analysis of Neologisms in Social Media English: A Study of Word Formation Processes

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the morphology of neologisms in social media English, and the most common processes of creating new words. Instagram and Tik Tok are becoming dynamic spaces of linguistic creativity in the contemporary digital age, where new units of lexicon are generated, edited, and shared in interactions between users of these spaces. The study is qualitative which follows a textual analysis. A sample of 40 neologisms was gathered via the social media comments and captions reflecting the real and natural use of language. Words chosen were examined according to known morphological patterns of words, with an emphasis on major processes of word formation, including blending, the formation of acronym, compounding, conversion and affixation. The results suggest that the most productive and common word formation processes in social media discourse are blending and compounding. This implies that users are attracted to both economical and creative forms of communication that enable them to create meaning within the space constraints. Acronyms were found to be the third most frequently used method for creating new words on social media. Overall, this work contributes to the understanding of the transformation of modern English in online space and the need to analyze the discourse of the digital era in the paradigm of modern linguistics.

Keywords: Neologism, Processes of Word Formation, Social Media English, Digital Communication, and Language Change.

1. Introduction

Language is a living and ever-changing system that varies with social, cultural, technological and communicative changes in the society. Social media is one of the most powerful contributors to linguistic change and vocabulary growth in the digital age. Instagram and Tik Tok are the platforms that have changed not only the manner of communication but also the manner in which language is formed, edited, and shared among its users. These platforms have consequently proven to be abundant areas where neologisms are constructed. Neologisms are new lexical entries or phrases that are created to characterize contemporary life, technological changes, feelings, fashions, and social identifications. Crystal (2011) argues that internet communication enhances linguistic creativity since all its users are always experimenting with the language in an attempt to express themselves effectively and capture attention in online spaces. In a similar way, Yule (2010) expounds that whenever speakers face new communicative requirements, new words are created using various morphological operations. Androutsopoulos (2014) says that the way we talk to each other on computers has changed the way we use language nowadays and how we interact online.

Recent studies also agree with this idea. Zappavigna (2020) explains that websites like Instagram and Tik Tok help people be creative with language and show who they are by using fun ways of talking. Similarly, Lee (2021) says that people are always making up words and sharing them with each other when they talk online and they do this by mixing words together making new short words, from big words and coming up with other new ways to make words.

The reliance on the innovative word-formation processes is one of the most significant characteristics of social media language. Neologisms are more simple linguistic inventions; they also perform important social and cultural functions. Users of social media use these expressions to develop an online identity, communicate feelings, get involved in a trend, and develop a sense of group membership. The reason why many neologisms gain popularity is that they represent common digital experiences that are shared by online communities. The current research is dedicated to the morphological analysis of the neologisms in Tik Tok captions and Instagram comments. This research project seeks to determine the key word-formation processes in these phrases, and explore how individuals are imaginatively using the language in new online contexts. The paper uncovers that social media has become a powerful contributor of lexical innovation in English today.

1.1. Research Questions

The following research questions are used in the study:

1. What are the most popular types of neologisms in social media English?
2. What are the most common processes of word formation?
3. What can these processes tell us about digital communication?

Through these questions, this study will help to have a better image of how social media can be a strong tool in the creation of the modern English vocabulary and fast-track the innovations in language.

2. Literature Review

Traditionally, only inflectional morphology was considered worthy of scholarly analysis, however derivational morphology has also received scholarly attention in the recent times (Mustafa, Anwar & Rasool, 2022; Mangrio & Mustafa, 2019; Iqbal, Mangrio & Mustafa, 2021). Word formation has traditionally been among the key study domains of derivational morphology since it describes how languages constantly grow and build their vocabularies. According to linguists, language development cannot take place without word formation since societies are always in need of new forms of expression to define the evolving cultural, social, and technological realities. Bauer (1983) believes that word formation is an active and regular linguistic process that allows speakers to create new lexicon based on existing vocabulary. Likewise, Plag (2003) states that morphological processes are the indicators of creativity and flexibility of the language users and they enable the process of communication to adapt to the new situations and experiences.

Digital communication and its influence on language change have become the focus of study of linguistics in recent years. The use of social media has impacted immensely on the way people use their language in communicating their daily lives. The use of social media such as Instagram and Tik Tok encourages fast, informal, interactive, and expressive communication. According to Crystal (2011), computer-mediated communication is a place where language becomes creative as people always adjust language to suit speed and comfort of online communication. Similarly, Tagg (2015) argues that social media sites provide a platform for individuals to reinvent language to communicate feelings, social bonds and self-identity.

Recent research shows how social media is changing how users create new words. In the process of changing language use, one of the ways online communications do so, as stated by Thurlow

and Jaworski (2021) is it is more informal and interactive. People are informal when conversing with one another in social media. As Androutsopoulos (2022) says, social media allows for the rapid production of words as people adapt their language to the trends online. He says that people adapt very quickly to what's hot on the internet. As Seargeant and Tagg (2023) explain, how we use language on media is vital in showing who we are online and being part of online communities. They say that social media language helps people connect with other people who share interests.

In addition, these neologisms are also influential sociolinguistically in online communities. Although the literature on the topic of word formation and digital communication is expanding, the analysis of platforms more specifically, with an emphasis on Tik Tok captions and Instagram comments, is still limited. The given research gap is particularly evident in the context of South Asia, where the digital linguistic practices are even under-examined. Thus, the current research will help fill this gap by presenting a systematic analysis of neologisms in TikTok captions and Instagram comments.

3. Theoretical Framework

The current research is based on the morphological theory which is one of the largest branches of linguistics involved in the inner structure of the words and the way how some new lexical elements are created. Yule (2010) defines morphology as the study of the structure of words and how speakers create new lexical forms to meet communicative demands. Likewise, Bauer (1983) states that the word formation process is dynamic and productive, wherein the language users are adaptable and creative. The current research particularly relies on the conventional categories of word-formation procedures that are distinguished in morphological theory. These are blending, compounding, formation of acronyms, conversion and affixation.

Blending is a process of merging the elements of two or more words in an effort to create a new lexical unit having a condensed meaning. Hangry (hungry + angry) and chillax (chill + relax) are examples of how consumers are creative in combining words to come up with short and expressive words. Another process that is important is compounding which is the process of combining two or more complete lexical items to form a new word or expression. The red flag, green flag, and outfit check are examples of how the forms of compounds can create culturally significant expressions in digital discourse. According to Bauer (1983) compounding is among the most effective processes of word-formation in English since it enables speakers to make semantically transparent forms, which are easy to comprehend. Recent research by Ezuruike and Ibileye (2025) explains that Generation Z uses blending and compounding a lot when they talk to each other on social media.

The creation of acronym is also an important aspect in online communication. Acronyms are language abbreviations that consist of the first letters of a word to form a shortened word like IYKYK, TBH, GRWM, and POV. Crystal (2011) claims that online communication promotes brevity, speed and informality, which is why acronyms and short forms are becoming more and more popular in online communication. Similarly, Ahmadi et al. (2025) mentioned that acronym creation and derivation are highly common in digital media discourse because users prefer short and expressive communication styles.

Another significant morphological process is affixation, i.e. the addition of prefixes or suffixes to the pre-existing lexical elements in order to get new meanings. Such terms as relatable, vlogger, and overthinking are some examples showing how affixation helps to expand the lexicon in online communication. Lieber (2009) states that affixation enables speakers to form vocabulary in a systematic way without losing the semantic relationship with the root words. Conversion is a metamorphosis of grammatical type of a word that does not involve any modification of its

morphological composition. To illustrate, flex, vibe, and vlog are words that are used as a noun and verbs in social media communication. According to Yule (2010) conversion is a very basic and efficient process since it allows speakers to establish new grammatical functions without the need to make other linguistic adjustments

Besides morphological theory, the change theories in digital communication also guide this study. Social media platforms like Tik Tok and Instagram are thus crucial places of lexical innovation whereby new vocabulary is created and rapidly disseminated by users. The combination of morphological theory and digital communication theory offers a powerful theoretical framework of the current study. The morphological theory provides an opportunity to study the structure of neologisms; the digital communication theory is utilized to explain the social and technological pressures which encourage linguistic creativity in the Internet.

4. Methodology

The present paper will be qualitative research in which the study of the morphologic processes that take place in the formation of the neologisms in social media discourse will be conducted. The main aim of the study is to find out how the users of social media creatively manipulate language using various word-formation processes and how the newly created lexical forms can be employed in online communication. The qualitative approach in the current research paper will allow a thorough investigation into the structural formation of neologisms and its semantic understanding within online communication.

The study data will be a set of neologisms gathered on Tik Tok captions and Instagram comments using purposive sampling. To begin with, 100 neologisms were gathered as a result of various social media posts, captions, and commentaries. Yet, 40 neologisms were chosen that were to be analyzed in detail after the extensive screening and reflection. The rest were ruled out due to either a lack of clear morphological structure, or failure to clearly depict a word-formation process, or simply inappropriate in context to be systematically analyzed.

The neologisms were selected with specific criteria to be used so that there should be consistency and relevance in analysis. Only lexical items were included, which are frequently used in the speech of social media and which vividly reflect some morphological processes. Besides, the chosen expressions had to be contextually relevant in digital communications and reflect at least one of the major word-formation processes like blending, compounding, acronym formation, conversion, or affixation. The examples of the chosen neologisms are situationship, brunch, netflixing, red flag, GRWM, POV, flex, vlog, and relatable. Descriptive morphological analysis was used to analyze the collected data. All neologisms were thoroughly analyzed to determine what kind of word-formation process took place in the structure of the neologism. Once identified, the lexical items were syntactically classified as one of the five broad morphological types: blending, compounding, acronym formation, conversion, and affixation. Frequencies of the categories were also noted in the study, in order to determine the productivity and prevalence of specific processes of word-formation in the discourse of social media use. The paper is based on theoretical approaches of morphological scholars, such as Yule (2010), Bauer (1983) and Plag (2003) whose typologies of the word-formation processes served as the basis of the study of the selected neologisms.

5. Findings and Discussion

This work implies that social media users, particularly Generation Z and Millennials are eager participants in the process of innovation of lexicon and are involved in the formation and distribution of lexical patterns that translate into the online culture, identity, creativity, and rapid communication. The neologisms collected are mostly related to the culture of entertainment, the use of online communication, relationships, the representation of fashion and lifestyle.

Although some demographic criteria, such as education level or geographical location, were unidentifiable at times due to the openness of social media sources, the language habits reveal much about the youth-oriented language on the Internet.

Table 1: Neologisms on social media and their word-formation processes

| Blending (25%) | Compounding (25%) | Acronym (20%) | Affixation (15%) | Conversion (15%) |
|----------------|-------------------|---------------|------------------|------------------|
| Situationship | Red flag | IYKYK | TikToker | Flex |
| Brunch | Green flag | TBH | Relatable | Vlog |
| Netflixing | Night owl | IMO | YouTuber | Adulthood |
| Smog | Dream house | BRB | Vlogger | Ghosting |
| Hangry | Selfie queen | FOMO | Overthinking | Vibe |
| Staycation | Best friend goal | GOAT | Viralness | Screenshot |
| Memeology | Room tour | IDK | | |
| Frenemy | Lip combo | IDC | | |
| Spork | Food lover | | | |
| Chillax | Outfit check | | | |

A) Blending

Plag (2003) highlights that blending is mostly performed in modern English since it produces new and salient lexical units. Blended forms can be popular among the social media users as they are funny, fashionable, and emotionally descriptive.

Table 2: Examples of blending in social media neologisms

| Neologism (Blending) | Word Combination | Part of Speech | Meaning / Social Context |
|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------|--|
| Situationship | Situation + relationship | Noun | An undefined or complicated romantic relationship without commitment |
| Brunch | breakfast + lunch | Noun | A late morning meal combining breakfast and lunch, often eaten socially on weekends |
| Netflixing | Netflix + -ing | Verb | The act of watching Netflix content for entertainment |
| Smog | smoke + fog | Noun | Air pollution formed by a mixture of smoke and fog; used in environmental discourse |
| Hangry | hungry + angry | Adjective | Feeling irritable or angry due to hunger; common in informal/social media language |
| Staycation | stay + vacation | Noun | A holiday spent at home or nearby instead of traveling |
| Memeology | meme + -ology | Noun | The study, creation, or analysis of internet memes in digital culture |
| Frenemy | Friend + enemy | Noun | A person who acts like a friend but behaves like an enemy |
| Spork | spoon + fork | Noun | A hybrid utensil combining a spoon and fork, often used in casual dining or fast food settings |

| | | | |
|---------|---------------|------|--|
| Chillax | chill + relax | Verb | To calm down and relax; used in informal digital communication to tell someone to stay calm or take it easy (common in social media captions and comments) |
|---------|---------------|------|--|

The blending became one of the most inventive word-formation processes in the dataset. Blended neologisms are constructed by taking two different lexical elements, and fusing them together to create a new word that has compressed meaning. Some examples found in the data are hangry, staycation, memeology, and chillax.

B) Compounding

The other productive word-formation process that was observed in the data collected was compounding. Compounds are constructions of two or more full lexical items to form a new expression with a new meaning. The examples found in the data are red flag, green flag, dream house, room tour, lip combo, and outfit check. Bauer (1983) says that the most fruitful process in English morphology is the process of compounding as it enables speakers to create new meanings using the lexical units available.

Table 3: Examples of compounding in TikTok and Instagram neologisms

| Neologisms (Compounding) | Word Combination | Part of Speech | Meaning / Social Context |
|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------|--|
| Red flag | red + flag | Noun | A warning sign of toxic or problematic behavior, especially in relationships (common on TikTok/Instagram) |
| Green flag | green + flag | Noun | A positive sign of good, healthy, or attractive behavior in a person or situation |
| Night owl | night + owl | Noun | A person who stays awake late at night and sleeps late in the morning |
| Dream house | dream + house | Noun | An ideal or perfect house someone wishes to own or live in |
| Selfie queen | selfie + queen | Noun | A person (usually a girl) who takes and posts many attractive selfies on social media |
| Best friend goal | best + friend + goal | Noun Phrase | A relationship ideal where best friends are extremely loyal, supportive, and perfect in bond |
| Room tour | room + tour | Noun | A video or post showing and explaining the arrangement and decoration of one’s room (popular on TikTok/YouTube) |
| Lip combo | lip + combo | Noun | Combination of lip products (lip liner, lipstick, gloss) used to achieve a specific makeup look. A warning sign of toxic or problematic behavior, especially |

| | | | |
|--------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| | | | in relationships (common on TikTok/Instagram) |
| Food lover | food + lover | Noun | A person who enjoys eating food very much and often explores different cuisines |
| Outfit check | outfit + check | Noun phrase / Social media expression | A phrase used on TikTok/Instagram where users show or highlight their clothing style, often before going out or in fashion-related posts (“checking” or showing their outfit) |

The findings reveal that compound neologisms are strongly connected to social media lifestyle culture. As an example, a red flag is commonly used to indicate toxic or problematic behaviour, particularly in romantic relationships, whereas a green flag indicates positive personality traits or healthy behaviour. In a similar vein, terms like outfit check and room tour represent the visual culture of Tik Tok and Instagram in which users often showcase personal style, room decoration, and lifestyle.

C) Acronyms

Internet initialisms and acronyms also became crucial characteristics of social media communication. Some examples found in the dataset are GRWM, POV, TBH, IDK and IYKYK. Online communication space, according to Crystal (2011) supports the use of short linguistic forms as it is the desire of the users to communicate quickly with the least typing efforts. Acronyms shorten long sentences to short and simple sentences that are easy to remember and pass on easily through the internet. Using TBH to show honest views and GRWM as a content genre, where creators shoot their self-care routines, are some examples.

Table 4: Examples of acronym in social media neologisms

| Neologism (Acronym) | Full Form | Part of Speech | Meaning / Social Context |
|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| IYKYK | If You Know, You Know | Noun / Phrase | Used to refer to insider knowledge or shared understanding within online communities |
| TBH | To Be Honest | Phrase / Adverbial Expression | Used before expressing an honest opinion, feeling, or statement |
| IMO | In My Opinion | Phrase / Adverbial Expression | Used to show that a statement reflects personal opinion |
| BRB | Be Right Back | Phrase | Used in online chats to indicate temporary absence |
| FOMO | Fear Of Missing Out | Noun | Anxiety about missing social events, trends, or experiences |
| GOAT | Greatest Of All Time | Noun | Used to praise someone considered the best in a particular field |
| IDK | I Don’t Know | Phrase | Used to express uncertainty or lack of information |

| | | | |
|-----|--------------|--------|--|
| IDC | I Don't Care | Phrase | Used to show indifference or lack of concern about something |
|-----|--------------|--------|--|

Acronym IYKYK gives it the impression of exclusivity and a sign of common cultural knowledge amongst its users. Such expressions are often interpreted depending on the digital literacy, age and exposure to online communities. This confirms the opinion that internet language is not just a communicative system, but it also serves as a tool of group status and belonging to the internet. Most of these expressions were coined in particular online communities and then shared on the international stage by social networking platforms, showing how quickly digital words can disseminate.

D) Affixation

It is also through affixation that social media neologisms were formed, but affixation did not seem to be as creatively dynamic as blending and compounding. Affixation is the process of attaching prefixes and suffixes to the already existing lexical elements to come up with new meanings. Examples found on the dataset are relatable, vlogger, and overthinking. Lieber (2009) claims that affixation is among the most systematic process in English morphology in that it enables the expansion of the vocabulary without disrupting the semantic connections with the base forms.

Table 5: Examples of affixation in social media neologisms

| Neologism (Affixation) | Process | Part of Speech | Meaning / Social Context |
|------------------------|--|----------------|--|
| TikToker | Suffixation (-er) | Noun | A person who creates or uploads content on TikTok |
| Relatable | Suffixation (-able) | Adjective | Something emotionally familiar or easy to connect with |
| YouTuber | Suffixation (-er) | Noun | A person who creates content on YouTube |
| Vlogger | Suffixation (-er) | Noun | A person who regularly creates video blogs online |
| Overthinking | Prefixation + Suffixation (over- + -ing) | Noun / Verb | Thinking excessively about situations or problems |
| Viralness | Suffixation (-ness) | Noun | The quality or state of becoming viral on social media |

These forms illustrate the ways in which prefixes and suffixes alter the already existing words as a show of online emotions, reactions, evaluations, and digital practices. As an example, relatable is often referred to as content that a user personally relates to. As the analyzed neologisms show, online users are constantly redefining vocabulary in innovative morphological ways to meet the communicative requirements of digital culture.

E) Conversion

Another important process that was found in the data gathered was conversion. Conversion is a process of changing the grammatical type of a word without changing the morphological structure. Flex, vibe and ghosting are some examples of the dataset. Yule (2010) says that conversion is a very loose and cost-effective process since speakers can add new vocabulary without necessarily coining new forms.

Table 6: Examples of conversion in social media neologisms

| Neologism (Conversion) | Original Category | Converted Category | Meaning / Social Context |
|------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
|------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|

| | | | |
|------------|--------------|-------------|--|
| Flex | Noun | Verb | To show off achievements, money, fashion, or possessions on social media |
| Vlog | Noun | Verb | To create or upload video blog content online |
| Adulthood | Noun (adult) | Verb / Noun | Acting like a responsible adult and managing life responsibilities |
| Ghosting | Noun (ghost) | Verb | Suddenly cutting off communication without explanation |
| Vibe | Noun | Verb | To enjoy, relax, or emotionally connect with a situation or atmosphere |
| Screenshot | Noun | Verb | To capture an image of a phone or computer screen |

The results show that communication via social media often changes nouns into verbs to narrate digital behaviours and online activities. In case of a ghost, it is used as a noun but has evolved to a verb of abruptly ceasing communication with someone online. The paper also shows that conversion is a contributor of action oriented online communication.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This current paper has explored the purpose of word-formation processes in social media English, relying on the collection of neologisms in Tik Tok captions and Instagram comments. The results reveal that social media sites have become very productive areas of linguistic innovation with users constantly transforming and extending the English vocabulary to suit new communicative demands. These findings are in accord with recent digital linguistic studies. Similarly, Zappavigna (2020), Lee (2021) and Androutsopoulos (2022) argue that social media platforms accelerate lexical innovation through interactive, trend-based and highly expressive communication practices. It was identified that there are other key word-formation processes that are actively applied to social media discourse, such as blending, compounding, formation of acronym, conversion, and affixation. The results also show that blending and acronym creation are especially prevalent in online communication due to the tendency of digital communication toward brevity, speed, and expressiveness of emotions. Chillax, hangry, GRWM, TBH, IYKYK are examples of expressions that combine creativity and communicative effectiveness to create new linguistic expressions.

Online identity is built in many ways through the use of numerous expressions to convey feelings, keep up with trends on the internet and achieve social belongingness in digital communities. To illustrate, words like red flag and green flag indicate the relationship discourse and online behavioural culture, and such words like IYKYK and IDC are used as signs of digital literacy and internet familiarity. In spite of the useful results of the current research, there are some drawbacks. The study was particular to Tik Tok captions and Instagram comments and examined a rather small corpus of neologisms. Hence, the scope of the analysis in the future needs to be broadened by gathering bigger and more heterogeneous corpora across different digital platforms like Tik Tok, Instagram, Facebook, X, Snapchat and YouTube. A larger dataset would give more in-depth information on the productivity and variation of word-formation processes in various online communities and communication styles.

Comparative and cross linguistic analyses should also be carried out in future studies to study the neologism formation in the English language and regional languages, especially Urdu. This

type of research would aid in investigating code-mixing, hybridization, borrowing, and multilingual language use patterns of South Asian digital discourse. Moreover, longitudinal research designs are suggested to investigate the evolution of neologisms with time and whether or not they eventually become mainstream or Standard English vocabulary. Moreover, in the future, the practical and sociolinguistic functions of social media neologisms ought to be better studied. The researchers will be able to explore the functions of word-formation processes in the construction of identities, expression of emotions, persuasion, discourse strategies, and interaction patterns on the Internet. This type of studies would give a better insight into the correlation between language, technology, culture, and digital communication.

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