

AMBIGUOUS EXPRESSIONS: A SEMANTIC STUDY ON SLANG IN GEN Z NARRATIVE DIALOGUES

Trinita Ivana Rumapea¹, Dr. Bernieke Anggita Ristia Damanik, S.Pd., M.Hum²
English Department, Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, Indonesia
Email : trinitarumapea@gmail.com¹, bernieke.damanik@uhn.ac.id²

Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of semantic ambiguity in narrative conversations among Generation Z. Ambiguity arises when a slang word or phrase may have more than one interpretation depending on context, speaker intention, or group understanding. The research uses a qualitative descriptive method with a semantic approach, focusing on 15 simulated narrative dialogues reflecting authentic Gen Z slang usage. Results show that ambiguous terms such as "slay," "cap," "fire," and "ghost" frequently cause misunderstanding without context-based clarification. Analysis reveals that ambiguity primarily stems from polysemy (62.5%), followed by homonymy (25%) and contextually fluid meanings (12.5%). This indicates a need for improved pragmatic awareness in both teaching and understanding informal digital discourse.

Keywords : Semantics, Ambiguity, Slang, Gen Z, Narrative Dialogue

Article History

Received: Juni 2025
Reviewed: Juni 2025
Published: Juni 2025
Plagiarism Checker No 234
Prefix DOI: Prefix DOI:
10.8734/CAUSA.v1i2.365
Copyright: Author
Publish by: SINDORO



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

ISSN 3025-6488



9 773025 648007

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Language is a system of signs and symbols used to convey meaning, and semantics is the branch of linguistics that focuses on how these meanings are structured and interpreted. As stated by Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007), semantics is concerned with the literal meanings of linguistic expressions, how these meanings are combined, and how ambiguity may arise from them. In contemporary linguistic contexts, especially among younger generations, ambiguity is becoming more frequent due to the dynamic evolution of informal expressions, particularly slang.

Generation Z, the demographic born between approximately 1997 and 2012, is widely recognized for its innovative and creative use of language, often driven by digital media. Their linguistic habits reflect not only sociocultural identity but also a tendency toward semantic complexity. Expressions such as "slay," "cap," "fire," "ghost," and "tea" are examples of slang that have multiple interpretations at the semantic level, depending on their usage and the conventional meaning assigned to them in various speech communities.

The phenomenon of semantic ambiguity defined as the presence of two or more possible meanings in a single linguistic form (Yule, 2020) is central to the study of Gen Z slang. Lyons (1977) classifies semantic ambiguity into lexical ambiguity, which involves single words with multiple meanings (polysemy or homonymy), and structural ambiguity, which concerns sentence-level interpretation. In Gen Z communication, the most common form of ambiguity appears to be lexical, where a word like "fire" can denote either literal combustion or a compliment (e.g., "That song is fire!").

Another significant contributor to semantic ambiguity is polysemy, where a word has multiple related meanings. For instance, the word "slay" may semantically denote "kill" in its original sense, but has expanded metaphorically to mean "performing

exceptionally well" in fashion or performance contexts. According to Cruse (2000), polysemy is one of the most pervasive sources of ambiguity in natural language, especially when combined with informal or subcultural registers like slang.

Semantic shifts changes in word meaning over time are frequent in youth language. Slang terms often undergo rapid semantic expansion and reinterpretation, especially in online discourse. As Crystal (2006) notes, the internet has accelerated the natural processes of semantic change, making youth speech a fertile ground for semantic study. This reinforces the need to analyze slang from a semantic lens to understand how meanings are encoded and decoded within specific communities.

This study focuses on analyzing the semantic ambiguity found in Gen Z slang expressions, particularly in the context of narrative dialogues that mimic real-life communication. By classifying the types of ambiguity such as polysemy, homonymy, and semantic shift, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed and potentially misunderstood among digital native speakers. Such a semantic analysis is essential for linguists, educators, and anyone aiming to comprehend modern linguistic behavior from a structural and meaning-based perspective.

1.2 Identification of the Problem

The use of ambiguous slang expressions has increased significantly in Gen Z communication, particularly in digital platforms. However, the ambiguity of such terms can cause confusion in interpretation, especially when they are used in conversations involving different generational or cultural backgrounds. The lack of awareness about semantic and contextual factors further complicates the understanding of these expressions.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The objectives of this research are:

- To identify commonly used ambiguous slang terms in Gen Z communication.
- To analyze the types of semantic ambiguity present in these terms.
- To explore how context influences meaning interpretation in narrative dialogues.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is expected to contribute to both academic and practical domains. Academically, it offers insights into the study of semantics and the interpretation of contemporary language usage among youth. Practically, the findings may assist educators, linguists, and language learners in understanding and teaching modern slang within the appropriate contextual framework. It also encourages awareness of semantic nuance in informal communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Semantic Ambiguity

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on meaning in language, how words, phrases, and sentences convey meanings. According to Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007) semantics is "the study of meaning communicated through language," dealing with how expressions relate to the world and to each other in terms of reference, truth, and sense. One of the key phenomena within semantics is ambiguity, which occurs when a linguistic expression has two or more possible interpretations.

Semantic ambiguity can lead to misunderstanding, misinterpretation, or creative usage in communication. Yule (2020) divides ambiguity into two major categories, lexical ambiguity, which arises when a single word has multiple meanings (e.g., bank as a financial institution or the side of a river), and structural ambiguity, which arises when the arrangement of words in a sentence allows multiple interpretations (e.g., The chicken is ready to eat, which may mean the chicken is hungry or prepared as food). Lyons (1977)

explains that ambiguity may be either unintentional resulting in confusion or deliberate, often used for humor, irony, or stylistic effect.

In addition to lexical and structural ambiguity, scholars also recognize other types such as referential ambiguity, which occurs when the referent of a word or phrase is unclear (e.g., She told her friend she was wrong, who is "she?"), and semantic shift, where meanings of words evolve over time. These phenomena are especially visible in informal, fast-changing registers such as slang.

Ambiguity is further enriched by polysemy, a word having multiple related meanings and homonymy, where a word form has entirely unrelated meanings. Cruse (2000) highlights polysemy as a major contributor to lexical ambiguity. For example, the word "slay" may originally mean "to kill," but in contemporary slang it also means "to perform exceptionally well" or "to look stunning." This semantic expansion contributes to the richness and variability of meaning, but also increases the potential for ambiguity, especially in cross-generational or intercultural contexts.

In the context of Generation Z slang, semantic ambiguity becomes a natural feature of communication. Terms like "fire," "cap," "ghost," and "tea" often carry multiple layers of meaning that depend heavily on shared cultural knowledge and linguistic innovation. As Crystal (2006) notes, digital communication has accelerated semantic change, leading to the rapid evolution of word meanings within online communities. Slang terms often begin with one meaning and gradually develop alternative interpretations through metaphor, irony, or group-specific usage.

Studying semantic ambiguity, especially as it appears in slang is essential for understanding the fluid nature of meaning in modern communication. It allows linguists to observe how meaning is not fixed but constantly reshaped by usage, social trends, and cultural influences. This research focuses on how such ambiguity manifests in Gen Z narrative dialogue, particularly through slang terms that are semantically complex and context-sensitive.

2.2 Slang in Generation Z Communication

Slang plays a central role in the linguistic behavior of Generation Z, functioning not only as a medium of informal expression but also as a powerful marker of identity, group solidarity, and cultural affiliation. In linguistic studies, slang is broadly defined as a set of informal, nonstandard, and often innovative expressions that emerge within particular social groups. Eble (1996) characterizes slang as a highly dynamic and creative component of language, typically used by youth to assert individuality, signal belonging, and mark generational boundaries. Slang is distinguished by its resistance to standardization, its rapid evolution, and its dependence on context, making it both a fascinating and challenging object of study.

Generation Z, generally identified as individuals born between 1997-2012, represents the first cohort to be raised entirely within the digital era. As such, their language practices are deeply influenced by the affordances of digital media and online platforms. Social networking services such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube are not only tools for communication but also spaces for linguistic innovation, where new slang terms are rapidly created, disseminated, and redefined. Slang expressions such as "slay," "cap," "ghost," "fire," and "tea" have gained widespread usage among Gen Z speakers, often carrying meanings that diverge significantly from their original or dictionary definitions. For example, the term "slay" originally meant to kill, but in Gen Z usage, it has come to mean performing or looking exceptionally well. Similarly, "cap" which traditionally refers to a head covering, now commonly means a lie or falsehood.

According to Coleman (2012), slang reflects broader cultural trends and is often shaped by subcultural influences, including African American Vernacular English (AAVE),

internet meme culture, gaming communities, and the language of social media influencers. This aligns with the view of Eble (1996) that slang is not random but culturally situated, reflecting the values, humor, and experiences of the communities that produce and use it. Because slang evolves within specific linguistic and social circles, its meaning is often opaque to outsiders. This insider knowledge requirement makes slang a powerful in-group code but also increases its susceptibility to semantic ambiguity, especially when interpreted by those unfamiliar with the originating culture or context.

The communicative function of slang within Generation Z goes beyond lexical creativity. It is a vehicle for social bonding, emotional expression, resistance to authority, and cultural commentary. Crystal (2006) observes that the flexibility of slang makes it particularly suited to online communication, where brevity, novelty, and identity signaling are key. Gen Z slang is often layered with irony, hyperbole, and playfulness, which further complicates its interpretation. This linguistic creativity is both a strength and a source of ambiguity, as the same term may carry multiple meanings depending on speaker intent, audience, tone, and situational context.

Understanding Gen Z slang requires a high degree of contextual sensitivity, as meanings are not fixed but fluid, negotiated through interaction. Interpretation relies heavily on co-text (the surrounding linguistic material), situational awareness, and shared cultural references. Without these elements, miscommunication is likely to occur, particularly for individuals outside the slang-using community, such as educators, linguists, language learners, or members of older generations. As Bucholtz (2009), youth language, including slang, is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a reflection of generational identity, social positioning, and media engagement.

Slang within Generation Z communication serves as a dynamic linguistic resource shaped by digital culture, peer interaction, and sociocultural trends. Its meanings are context-dependent, semantically rich, and often ambiguous. Therefore, the study of slang in this demographic is essential for understanding not only the evolution of informal language but also the social and cultural forces that drive contemporary linguistic change.

2.3 Semantic Factors Influencing Ambiguity

Semantic factors play a crucial role in shaping how ambiguity is constructed, perceived, and interpreted within language. These factors are central to semantic analysis because they demonstrate how meaning is not always fixed or singular, but instead influenced by internal features of language such as word relationships, meaning development, and cultural variation. According to Cruse (2000), meaning in language can be highly dynamic, and semantic phenomena such as polysemy, homonymy, and semantic shift contribute significantly to ambiguity, especially in informal and creative registers like slang.

One major semantic factor is polysemy, which refers to a single word having multiple related meanings. Lyons (1977) explains that polysemy arises when different senses of a word are conceptually connected, though they may differ in context. For example, the word “fire” can refer to literal combustion, but in Gen Z slang, it is often used metaphorically to mean something excellent or impressive (e.g., “That track is fire!”). The semantic relationship between these two senses lies in the idea of intensity or power, which transfers from the literal domain to the evaluative or expressive one.

Closely related is homonymy, where a single form corresponds to two or more completely unrelated meanings. Unlike polysemy, homonyms do not share a semantic core. Cruse (2000) defines homonymy as “an accidental similarity in form between two lexemes with distinct meanings.” For instance, the word “cap” may mean a type of headwear or, in slang usage, refer to a lie or false statement. These meanings are

unrelated etymologically and semantically, which can lead to confusion when used in ambiguous contexts.

Another important factor is semantic shift, which refers to the change in meaning that a word undergoes over time. As noted by Traugott and Dasher (2001), semantic change is a natural part of linguistic evolution, and in slang, these shifts tend to happen rapidly. For example, the word “bad”, which traditionally means undesirable or negative, has developed a new meaning among youth as something positive or “cool.” This shift demonstrates how meanings are not static but can invert entirely within certain communities, leading to potential misinterpretation by those unfamiliar with the new usage.

Metaphorical extension contributes significantly to semantic ambiguity. This process involves extending the meaning of a word from its original domain to a new, often abstract one based on perceived similarity. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor is a fundamental mechanism through which humans conceptualize abstract ideas. In slang, the term “ghost” originally refers to a supernatural entity but has been extended metaphorically to describe the act of suddenly cutting off communication with someone. The semantic connection lies in the idea of disappearing without explanation, much like a ghost vanishes.

Cultural semantics must be considered when analyzing ambiguity in slang. Cultural background and shared group knowledge influence how certain terms are interpreted. For example, the slang term “tea”, meaning gossip or personal information, is primarily rooted in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and has been popularized through internet culture and drag communities. As Eble (1996) points out, slang is a social marker, and its meaning often depends on membership in particular speech communities. Without understanding the cultural origin of such terms, listeners may fail to grasp their intended meaning, thus resulting in semantic ambiguity.

All these semantic factors, polysemy, homonymy, semantic shift, metaphorical extension, and cultural semantics interact dynamically with context to shape meaning. While context and pragmatics play a role in disambiguating usage, these semantic properties are the foundation of how multiple meanings arise in the first place. Especially within the fast evolving and creative language of Generation Z, these semantic features are essential to study in order to understand how youth construct and interpret meaning in their everyday communication.

2.4 Contextual Analysis in Slang Interpretation

Context is a crucial component in the semantic interpretation of slang, particularly when dealing with ambiguous expressions that carry multiple meanings. From a semantic standpoint, context is not merely a background for language use, but an interpretive framework that interacts with lexical items to assign specific meanings. According to Lyons (1977), the interpretation of meaning depends not only on the semantic properties of words but also on their situational deployment, which makes context a vital semantic determinant.

In semantic analysis, context is not merely a supplementary element but a central component in determining meaning, especially in ambiguous expressions. When words or phrases possess multiple semantic possibilities, it is the surrounding context that selects and activates one meaning while suppressing others. As Cruse (2000) states, the semantic potential of an expression is realized only when interpreted within a specific context. In the case of Gen Z slang, this interpretive function of context becomes even more crucial due to the highly flexible and innovative nature of informal youth language.

Context, in semantics, can be subdivided into linguistic context (co-text) and extralinguistic context. The linguistic context includes the surrounding words or syntactic

structures that help restrict or specify the meaning of a potentially ambiguous term. For example, the slang word “cap” may refer to a lie, but this interpretation only becomes clear when embedded in a sentence such as “That’s cap, bro,” where the subject matter and tone of disbelief indicate the non-literal meaning. Without the co-text, the listener may interpret it as referring to a physical hat, thus misapplying its homonymous meaning.

The extralinguistic or situational context encompasses factors such as speaker intention, relationship between interlocutors, shared cultural knowledge, social setting, and even the medium of communication (e.g., text message, video, or face-to-face talk). In Gen Z communication, many slang terms, such as “fire,” “slay,” “ghost,” or “tea” acquire meaning not just from their lexical roots but from their use in specific socio-cultural frames. The term “slay,” for example, means “to look exceptionally good” or “to perform well” only in contexts where style, performance, or achievement is under discussion. If taken out of such a context, its older sense “to kill” might be semantically inferred instead, leading to misunderstanding.

Cultural context is especially significant in the interpretation of slang. Certain terms originate from African American Vernacular English (AAVE), drag culture, or internet subcultures. The slang “tea,” meaning gossip, derives from AAVE and became widely used through social media influencers and drag shows. For someone outside these cultural spheres, “tea” may only be recognized in its denotative sense as a beverage. Without cultural literacy or familiarity with the speaker’s background, listeners may fail to identify the intended meaning, resulting in failed communication. This supports the theory of cultural semantics, which emphasizes that meaning is partly a product of shared social experience and group-specific conventions (Coleman, 2012).

Another semantic mechanism that interacts with context is metaphorical extension, which occurs when a concrete concept is semantically extended to an abstract domain. For instance, the term “fire” undergoes metaphorical extension from the domain of heat or combustion to that of evaluation or praise. The context of use (e.g., discussing a song, outfit, or performance) helps clarify this abstracted usage. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), these metaphorical mappings are not arbitrary but conceptually grounded in embodied experience.

The speaker’s intention and the hearer’s inferential capacity play a vital role in contextual disambiguation. Semantically ambiguous terms often require inferential processing supported by background knowledge, expectations, and prior discourse. In slang-rich discourse, especially among Gen Z speakers, successful interpretation depends on the listener’s ability to semantically decode based on contextual alignment. Mey (2001) argues that every utterance must be interpreted in context to grasp what is meant, not just what is said.

Contextual analysis is a necessary semantic tool for decoding slang ambiguity. The combination of co-text, situational context, speaker intent, and cultural background forms the interpretive framework that enables listeners to resolve lexical ambiguity. For scholars of semantics, this highlights the importance of considering context not just as external to meaning, but as a constitutive element in the construction of meaning itself.

RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive design, which is appropriate for analyzing language phenomena that require interpretation and contextual understanding. According to Moleong (2007), qualitative research focuses on understanding meaning, patterns, and the relationships of phenomena through verbal data. The descriptive

approach is used to provide a comprehensive explanation of the types and functions of ambiguity in Gen Z slang.

3.2 Method of Data Collection

The data in this study were obtained from 15 narrative dialogues constructed by university students of English Education at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar. The dialogues were designed to reflect authentic use of Gen Z slang in everyday conversation. Each participant was asked to write a short dialogue involving 2-3 characters using common slang expressions. These dialogues were then examined to identify occurrences of ambiguous terms.

3.3 Data Source and Participants

The participants of this study consist of 15 second and fourth semester university students between the ages of 19-22. They are active users of digital media, familiar with contemporary slang used on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. Most of them speak Indonesian as a second language and a local language as their first language, making them suitable informants for observing multilingual and cross-cultural semantic patterns.

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

The collected dialogues were analyzed using a semantic approach. Each slang term identified in the data was classified according to its ambiguity type (polysemy, homonymy, contextual ambiguity). The researcher then interpreted the meaning of each term based on its surrounding context (co-text), situational setting, and speaker intention. Frequency tables were created to represent dominant ambiguity types, and selected dialogues were used as examples to support the analysis.

3.5 Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility and reliability, triangulation was applied. Triangulation was conducted by comparing students' dialogue content with slang usage trends in real-life online platforms. In addition, results were reviewed by linguistic lecturers to confirm the classification of ambiguity types and interpretation accuracy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Overview of Ambiguous Expressions

The identification and classification of ambiguous expressions in Gen Z slang reveal significant insights into how meaning operates within informal youth discourse. In this study, 40 instances of semantically ambiguous slang were extracted from 15 narrative dialogues. These expressions were categorized into three primary semantic types: polysemy (62.5%), homonymy (25%), and contextual or cultural ambiguity (12.5%).

The dominance of polysemy highlights how meaning expansion and metaphorical reinterpretation are foundational to Gen Z's creative linguistic practices. Polysemous expressions such as "slay" and "fire" illustrate how words with established meanings undergo semantic broadening, often through metaphorical extension or evaluative reinterpretation. This supports Cruse's (2000) assertion that polysemy allows for increased expressive range while maintaining a conceptual link to the original sense.

Homonymy, although less frequent, presents a unique challenge in semantic analysis due to the complete lack of relatedness between meanings. Expressions like "cap" exemplify homonymous ambiguity, where the word form maps onto entirely unrelated meanings (e.g., a hat vs. a lie). According to Lyons (1977), the disambiguation of homonyms relies entirely on co-text and extralinguistic cues, since semantic content alone does not indicate a preferred meaning.

The remaining cases fall under contextual ambiguity, where meaning cannot be fully derived from lexical semantics but must be inferred from socio-cultural context, co-

text, and speaker intent. These expressions, such as “tea” for gossip, require familiarity with the speech community’s cultural norms to decode. As Eble (1996) notes, slang functions as a sociolect that encodes in-group knowledge and identity, and its semantic values are intelligible only within that shared framework.

Overall, the prevalence of semantic ambiguity in Gen Z slang demonstrates that the generation’s language is semantically layered, innovatively metaphorical, and highly dependent on social and cultural context. The findings support the view that slang is not merely expressive but also structurally rich in semantic potential, thus necessitating systematic semantic analysis for accurate interpretation.

4.2 Examples of Ambiguous Slang and Interpretation

To clarify the categorization of ambiguity, Table 1 presents selected examples of Gen Z slang expressions identified in the study, along with excerpts from participant dialogues, type of semantic ambiguity, and explanations based on semantic theory.

Table 1: Examples of Ambiguous Slang Expressions in Gen Z Narrative Dialogue

No	Slang Term	Dialogue Excerpt	Type of Ambiguity	Semantic Description & Interpretation
1	Slay	“You slayed that test!”	Polysemy	Originally means “to kill” → extended meaning: “to perform very well” (metaphorical polysemy).
2	Cap	“That’s cap, bro.”	Homonymy	Can mean “a hat” or “a lie” (slang); unrelated meanings with the same form.
3	Fire	“This song is fire!”	Polysemy	Literal: combustion / Figurative: excellent or exciting – based on metaphorical extension.
4	Ghost	“He ghosted me last week.”	Polysemy	Literal: supernatural being / Slang: suddenly cutting off contact – a semantic shift rooted in metaphor.
5	Tea	“Spill the tea!”	Contextual	Literal: a beverage / Slang: gossip – interpretation depends on shared cultural understanding (AAVE origin).

These examples show how each ambiguous expression is semantically classified and interpreted based on both lexical properties and contextual usage. As Cruse (2000) emphasizes, recognizing the semantic relationship between meanings is crucial in distinguishing polysemy from homonymy.

4.3 Interpretation through Contextual Clues

To gain a deeper understanding of how slang ambiguity is interpreted, this study analyzed the surrounding linguistic and situational context in each narrative dialogue. Contextual clues including tone, subject matter, character relationships, and conversational flow, played a crucial role in determining the intended meaning of each slang term. Below are selected excerpts of participant-generated dialogues, demonstrating how contextual information supports semantic interpretation:

Dialogue Example - Slang: Slay

Characters: Kevin and Mia
Scene: After receiving results from a difficult exam
Mia: “Guess what? I got the highest score in math!”
Kevin: “Wow, you totally slayed that test!”

Interpretation:

In this dialogue, the slang term “slay” does not mean “to kill” as in its literal sense, but instead means to perform very well or succeed impressively. The school setting, the topic of exams, and the friendly tone clearly suggest the intended meaning. This is a case of polysemy, where the original meaning has extended metaphorically to express success. The use of “slay” in social media and youth culture also supports this figurative interpretation, making it familiar among Gen Z speakers.

Dialogue Example - Slang: Cap

Characters: Brian and Jake

Scene: Casual argument over sports statistics

Jake: “Bro, I could beat LeBron in a one-on-one.”

Brian: “Man, that’s cap. No way!”

Interpretation:

The term “cap” is used to accuse someone of lying or exaggerating. The absurdity of Jake’s claim and Brian’s emphatic reaction allow “cap” to be interpreted as a slang term for falsehood. This illustrates homonymy, since “cap” also exists as a noun referring to headwear but carries an unrelated meaning here. Lyons (1977) highlights that homonyms rely heavily on co-text for disambiguation.

Dialogue Example - Slang: Fire

Characters: Andy and Maya

Scene: Talking about a new song released by a popular artist

Andy: “Hey, have you listened to Drake’s new track?”

Maya: “Yeah, it’s straight fire! I’ve had it on repeat all day.”

Interpretation:

The word “fire” in this context clearly refers to the song being impressive or exciting. The co-text (“I’ve had it on repeat”) and the topic (music) support a metaphorical interpretation aligned with polysemy. This usage reflects metaphorical extension, as described by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), where emotional intensity (associated with literal fire) is mapped onto quality and enjoyment.

Dialogue Example - Slang: Ghost

Characters: Sarah and Jenny

Scene: Discussing dating experiences

Sarah: “So, how’s it going with Liam?”

Jenny: “He ghosted me after our second date. No calls, no texts... nothing.”

Interpretation:

Here, “ghosted” conveys a sudden disappearance or cutting off contact, a figurative shift from its literal meaning of a supernatural entity. This is a clear case of polysemy, where metaphor plays a role in shaping social meaning. The emotional context (dating) helps frame the meaning correctly, avoiding misinterpretation.

Dialogue Example - Slang: Tea

Characters: Nina and Bella

Scene: Chatting during lunch break

Nina: “Girl, I saw Rachel leaving Mr. Dan’s office after class.”

Bella: “No way! Spill the tea—what happened?”

Interpretation:

In this interaction, “tea” does not refer to a beverage but instead to gossip or juicy news. The informal setting, female peer interaction, and cultural context (e.g., AAVE and

internet culture) strongly signal the intended slang usage. This is a contextual ambiguity type where meaning cannot be derived semantically alone but must consider cultural knowledge and co-textual clues.

These examples clearly demonstrate that the interpretation of ambiguous slang relies heavily on context. As Mey (2001) utterances must be analyzed not only in terms of their linguistic structure but also their situational meaning, which includes speaker intention, shared assumptions, and social norms. Without adequate contextual understanding, even familiar terms like “fire” or “ghost” may be misunderstood, highlighting the need for context-sensitive semantic analysis.

4.4 Discussion

The semantic analysis of Gen Z slang conducted in this study confirms that ambiguity is not an accidental byproduct but a systemic feature of youth language. The predominance of polysemy (62.5%) in the data reveals that lexical items in slang often undergo semantic extension, developing additional related meanings while retaining a conceptual connection to their original sense. This is especially evident in terms such as “slay” and “fire”, whose figurative meanings emerge from metaphorical mappings grounded in cognitive semantics, as explained by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

While polysemy adds semantic richness, homonymy (25%) represents a more disruptive form of ambiguity. With words like “cap”, where meanings are etymologically and semantically unrelated, miscommunication is more likely if contextual disambiguation fails. Lyons (1977) emphasizes that homonymous ambiguity cannot be resolved without access to extra-semantic cues, such as tone, topic, or cultural alignment, which Gen Z speakers intuitively navigate but outsiders may misinterpret. The presence of contextually derived ambiguity (12.5%), such as in the term “tea”, highlights the intersection between semantics and sociocultural competence. Here, meaning does not reside in the lexeme itself but in the culturally informed interactional context. This aligns with Cruse’s (2000) view that meaning potential is realized through contextual activation, a crucial concept in modern semantic theory that explains how socially embedded usage determines which semantic interpretation is invoked.

These results underscore the didactic implications for semantics education. Understanding slang requires more than dictionary definitions; it demands analytical tools for interpreting semantic variation, metaphor, polysemy, and cultural salience. As Djajasudarma (2009) asserts, the study of semantics is essential for decoding everyday language phenomena, particularly when they are fast-changing, informal, and context-sensitive.

Ambiguity in slang is both a semantic challenge and an expressive resource. For linguists, educators, and learners, engaging with this phenomenon semantically rather than pragmatically alone offers deeper insight into how language constructs, shifts, and negotiates meaning in real-world, digitally mediated communication. Semantic analysis, therefore, plays a foundational role in understanding linguistic creativity and variation in contemporary youth language.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored semantic ambiguity in slang expressions commonly used by Generation Z within narrative dialogues. Through qualitative semantic analysis of 15 dialogues, the research identified 40 ambiguous slang terms, classified into polysemy (62.5%), homonymy (25%), and contextual ambiguity (12.5%). The findings confirm that polysemous expressions are the most dominant type of ambiguity in Gen Z communication, reflecting the generation’s linguistic creativity and cultural adaptation.

Slang terms such as “slay,” “cap,” “fire,” “ghost,” and “tea” demonstrate how meaning is shaped by semantic mechanisms like metaphorical extension, semantic shift, and cultural semantics. These expressions do not carry fixed meanings, but instead rely on co-text, speaker intention, shared knowledge, and digital platform norms. Without contextual awareness, these expressions are prone to misinterpretation especially by those outside the speaker’s linguistic or generational community.

The study reinforces the importance of semantic and contextual literacy, especially in navigating modern informal discourse. Ambiguity in slang is not merely a barrier but also a reflection of the dynamic and expressive nature of human language. Therefore, understanding how ambiguity works semantically can support effective communication across diverse social and generational groups. This research also provides valuable insight for language educators, learners, and researchers seeking to understand the intersection of youth language, meaning, and context in contemporary digital society.

5.2 Suggestions

In light of the findings, it is recommended that future research further explores semantic ambiguity in slang through diverse data sources, including real-life conversations and social media discourse, to capture the evolving nature of language use among Generation Z. Educators and language practitioners should consider incorporating contemporary slang and contextual meaning analysis into curriculum design to help learners develop semantic and cultural awareness. Understanding how ambiguous expressions function in informal settings can also improve cross-generational communication and foster greater linguistic inclusivity. Moreover, linguists may benefit from comparative studies across age groups, regions, or online communities to examine how interpretation varies, enriching the study of semantics in modern, socially embedded language use.

REFERENCES

- Bucholtz, M. (2009). From stance to style: Gender, interaction, and indexicality in Mexican immigrant youth slang. In A. Jaffe (Ed.), *Stance: Sociolinguistic Perspectives* (pp. 146-170). Oxford University Press.
- Chaer, A., & Agustina, L. (2010). *Sociolinguistik: Perkenalan awal*. Rineka Cipta.
- Coleman, J. (2012). *The life of slang*. Oxford University Press.
- Cruse, D. A. (2000). *Meaning in language: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2006). *Language and the internet*. Cambridge University Press.
- Djajasudarma, F. (2009). *Semantik*. Refika Aditama.
- Eble, C. (1996). *Slang and sociability: In-group language among college students*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Hurford, J. R., Heasley, B., & Smith, M. B. (2007). *Semantics: A coursebook* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mey, J. L. (2001). *Pragmatics: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Blackwell Publishing.
- Tarigan, H. G. (2011). *Pengajaran semantik*. Angkasa.
- Traugott, E. C., & Dasher, R. B. (2001). *Regularity in semantic change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yule, G. (2020). *The study of language* (7th ed.). Cambridge University Press.