

Research Article

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Semantic changes and the social media images in Twitter gaming community's slangs

Lovely Queen Vidinta Lucentius^a, Nurina Azyyati^a, Aisah Aisah^a

^aEnglish Literature, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Jl. Rawamangun Muka, Jakarta Timur, Indonesia 13220

queencyvidinta@gmail.com

Abstract

Language in digital spaces evolves rapidly, resulting in various changes, including semantic changes. This study examines slangs in the Twitter Gaming Community, a group particularly prone to language change, focusing on patterns of semantic change and identifying the dominant types of semantic change. Such changes can also reflect the community's social identity. Using Luján's (2010) framework, which includes amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical extension, broadening, and narrowing, this study found that pejoration was the most dominant pattern (35.7%). This indicates a change toward evaluative and competitive discourse. These pejorative pattern changes suggest a linguistic culture shaped by hierarchy, performance, and judgment. Overall, the findings show that slangs in Twitter gaming community demonstrates not only semantic flexibility but also reflect the social dynamics, values, and identity of the gaming subculture within the broader digital media context.

Keywords: Semantic Change; Slang; Twitter; Gaming Community; Pejoration; Luján Theory

1. Introduction

Language is an ever-changing system, and online communication has dramatically sped up the process of linguistic creativity. With the emergence of social networking platforms such as Twitter, the speed and extent of language evolution have widened exponentially. Twitter, as a microblogging platform with real-time, character-limited interactions, presents a unique linguistic environment. Among the most dynamic subcultures on Twitter is the gaming community, which tends to speak in a particular vocabulary of slang that develops in tandem with gaming culture itself.

The gaming community is characterized by its dynamic, competitive, and expressive communication style. Slang terms come and go at a rapid rate. Terminology such as “noob,” “nerf,” and “clutch” captures particular experiences, strategies, or assessments in games. Such terms tend to take on meanings far removed from their original usage. Examining these semantic changes offers an understanding of not only linguistic trends but also the cultural values and social dynamics of the gaming subcultures.

Although existing research (e.g., Jahan & Irfan, 2021; Rafikovna, 2023) has analyzed slangs on social media in general, it tends to ignore the specialized linguistic environments of individual online communities. This research fills that void by investigating patterns of semantic change in Twitter gaming community by applying Luján's (2010) typology as a model. Luján's typology of semantic change patterns refers to the evolution of word meanings over time, often driven by

social, cultural, and technological factors. Luján (2010) categorizes semantic change into five patterns: Amelioration, Pejoration, Broadening, Narrowing, and Metaphorical Extension. These patterns allow language to change and respond to various social contexts. In the case of semantic changes in Twitter gaming community, the changes tend to be culturally driven. The changes are shaped by how communities use them – for example, for labeling, inclusion, exclusion, humor, critique, or performance.

The gaming community illustrates these processes. Performance, identity, and teamwork are frequently encoded in specific terms. For instance, addressing one as a “noob” is not merely an expression of lack of experience, but also serves as a social judgement. Exploring such semantic changes can reveal how slangs in gaming community reflects broader community norms, values, and social hierarchies. Hence, this article aims to explore how the slangs which are used by Twitter gaming community changes semantically and how this can reflect the community’s social media images.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine semantic change in slangs used by Twitter gaming community. According to Creswell (2016), qualitative descriptive research seeks to understand and describe the meanings constructed by individuals or groups, often in relation to social or humanitarian issues. This approach is well-suited for exploring the nuanced, context-dependent processes of semantic change in slang words, particularly within a specific online subculture. The focus on Twitter gaming community aligns with the interpretive nature of qualitative research, which examines how meanings are constructed, negotiated, and transformed within defined social contexts.

Data were collected from tweets in the platform’s “Gaming” community using random sampling. Following Noor (2022), random sampling is effective in relatively homogenous populations, as it gives every individual an equal chance of selection and minimizes bias. This method is particularly suitable for the gaming community, which shares a common set of linguistic practices. To be included in the dataset, tweets had to contain slang identifiable as gaming language, show evidence of semantic shift, and have been posted within the past two years.

A total of 28 slang terms meeting these criteria were identified and classified according to Luján’s (2010) typology of semantic change. Original meanings were obtained from standard dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster and the Online Etymology Dictionary, while new meanings were inferred from their usage context and cross-checked using Urban Dictionary.

3. Results

Based on Lujan’s (2010) five semantic change types, each slang word collected from Twitter has been categorized and analyzed. From a total of 28 entries, the study found 28 slang terms used in the tweets from the gaming community. There were 10 (ten) that underwent the pattern of pejoration, 9 (nine) amelioration, 4 (four) metaphorical extension, 3 (three) broadening, and 2 (two) narrowing (See table 1). Afterwards, the following section presents the analysis of each pattern type

Table 1. Frequency of Semantic Change Patterns in Twitter Gaming Slang

No.	Pattern Type	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Pejoration	10	35.7%

2.	Amelioration	9	32.1%
3.	Metaphorical Extension	4	14.3%
4.	Broadening	3	10.7%
5.	Narrowing	2	7.1%
Total		28	100%

3.1 Pejoration

The pattern of Pejoration occurs when words that originally had a neutral or positive connotative meaning have undergone a negative connotation shift. Out of 28 entries of data, pejoration took up 10 entries (35.7%), making it the most dominant pattern to happen from all the entries. These pejorative terms reveal the competitive ethos of gaming culture, where skill and performance are central to social identity. Failure or weakness is stigmatized, and language becomes a tool for boundary policing. Examples include:

- Noob

“Any tips for an oblivion **noob**?” - @D_*** **

The word *Noob* is derived from the word *Newbie*, which according to Merriam Webster Dictionary, refers to a person who has recently started a particular activity. However, the word *Noob* from the word *newbie* in this tweet is referring to a derogatory word of calling oneself inexperienced in gaming. Regarding the shift in meaning, Urban Dictionary describes the word *Noob* as a term derived from the video game world meaning someone who is new at a game or activity and is horrible at it but is not willing to learn and does not acknowledge the fact of such.

Seeing from both meanings, the word *Noob* first refers to anyone who just started trying new things in which the word has a more neutral connotation to it. While the word *Noob* in the gaming community now took on a derogatory edge to it, referring to people as being ‘bad’ at the game giving the word a negative connotation instead. Due to this, the semantic change pattern of the word *Noob* can be categorized as Pejoration.

- Scrub

“Get gud **scrub** 🤔🤔” - @I***B***u

The word *scrub*, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, refers to the act of cleaning with a hard rubbing motion using a brush or other cleaning utensils. If, according to the original meaning, the word is used as a verb to indicate an action (verb). However, when looking at the tweet and how the word *scrub* is used, the word *scrub* here is used as a subject instead of a verb, as there is already a verb in the tweet, which is the word *get*. When looking at the context of the tweet, the Twitter user is trying to use the word *scrub* as a word to refer to someone or as a subject here.

According to the Urban Dictionary, there is a shift in meaning regarding the use of the word in the tweet’s context. The word *scrub* in the gaming context, according to Urban Dictionary, is a noun that is used as a derogatory term for someone. In the gaming context, it particularly refers to a gamer who is bad at their skills, regardless of whether they are a new player or an older player.

Seeing from both meanings, there is a shift in how the word is used. The first meaning refers to an action that has a more neutral connotation to it, while the second meaning refers to a derogatory term instead and has gained a negative connotation. Due to this, the word *scrub* can be categorized as the semantic change pattern of Pejoration, as the word has gained a negative connotation to its meaning from the original neutral connotation of the word’s meaning.

3.2 Amelioration

The pattern of Amelioration is the opposite of Pejoration. This pattern occurs when words that originally had a neutral or negative connotative meaning instead gained a positive connotation shift. Out of 28 entries of data, amelioration took up 9 entries (32.1%), making it the second most common pattern to happen, following closely just behind pejoration. These shifts often reflect admiration and insider status. Ameliorated terms help construct in-group prestige and signal belonging. Example include:

- Goat

*"I main the **GOAT** himself, Iron Man 🕶️" - @IIn***X*

The word *GOAT*, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, is a noun that refers to a mammal with hollow backwardly arcing horns, a short tail, and usually straight hair that is related to the animal sheep. However, referring to a person, in this case a character from a movie who is Iron Man, as an animal seems odd and could be insulting instead. The user intended context instead seems to use the word *GOAT* in the tweets as some kind of a positive compliment for the character, which is further supported by the sunglasses smiling emoji that are often associated with being cool.

The shift in meaning can also be seen in Urban Dictionary, which describes the word *GOAT* as an acronym of "Greatest of All Time" that is meant as a compliment to a person who is deemed as the 'coolest' or the 'best.' The change in meaning has made the word *GOAT* that first have a neutral (an animal) or even a negative meaning (insulting people by comparing them to an animal) instead experienced a full reversal in meaning by gaining a positive connotation to its meaning, making the word represents a compliment, admiration, and excellence in gaming performance. This resulted in the semantic change pattern of the word *GOAT* as amelioration due to the shift in gaining a positive connotation to its meaning.

- Drip

*"Rate the **drip** #PokemonTCG" - @x_**_x*

The word drip according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary is refers to something that falls in drops or seems to spill copiously (usually refers to liquid. When looking at the context of the tweet, it does not seem to quite make sense to rate a drip of a liquid when talking about Pokémon, which is a game of collecting monster types.

When looking at the Urban Dictionary, however, the term has undergone a shift in meaning and is now used to describe the appearance of something as very swag or cool. This shifted meaning fits more to what the user of the tweet is trying to deliver, as the user is trying to tell the audience to rate the 'coolness' of the appearances of the Pokémon monsters by using the word *drip*.

The word originally is a neutral term that refers to an action of something, but in the shifted meaning, the word gained a positive connotation as it is now being used as a compliment by people. Therefore, the word *drip* can be categorized as the semantic change pattern of amelioration as the word turns from a neutral term to a positive one, with how the word is currently being used, especially in the gaming community as a compliment.

3.3 Metaphorical Extension

The pattern of Extension occurs when words are repurposed metaphorically to convey a concept not originally associated with the literal meaning. Out of 28 entries of data, amelioration took up 4 entries (14.3%). Metaphor enhances expressive range, letting users map physical or emotional experiences onto gameplay. For example:

- Camping

*"Dude was **camping** by the Rift." - @Mi*****64***

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word *camping* refers to an act of making a temporary camp (place usually away from urban areas where tents or simple buildings (such as

cabins) are erected for shelter or for temporary residence) or occupying a camp. In a simpler sense, it is the act of setting up a tent to reside in one spot for a while.

However, in the gaming context, the term *camping* does not refer to the literal act of camping. According to the Urban Dictionary, camping in the gaming context is a term used most frequently in first-person shooter (FPS) video games, which refers to the act of hiding or otherwise remaining in a hidden, obscured, or safe location to ambush an enemy or objective, or to avoid harm.

Although both have quite different meanings, the intended context of the word *camping* from both meanings has a similar behavior, which is staying in one place. The literal meanings still stay the same, as there is no complete replacement of the first meaning, but rather gain an additional, new figurative meaning that is context-specific to the gaming community based on the resemblance of the act itself. Thus, the word *camping* can be categorized as a semantic change pattern of metaphorical extension, as its meaning extended metaphorically into the environment of online gaming.

3.4 Broadening and Narrowing

The pattern of broadening occurs when a word that originally had a narrow or specific use of meaning gains a wider range of meaning applications. Out of 28 entries of data, broadening took up 3 entries (10.7%). Narrowing on the other hand, is the opposite of Broadening. The pattern occurs when a word that originally had a broader or general use of meaning instead becomes more specific than it originally was. Out of 28 entries of data, narrowing took up 2 entries (7.1%), which makes it the least common pattern to happen out of all the categories. These changes signal increased specialization and refinement in in-group terminology. Examples include:

- Broadening – Nerf

*“If you're in charge of a Sonic fighting game, where do you stand on the subject of Sonic, Shadow, and Silver? Do you allow them to be completely unfair as they canonically are, or **nerf** them and risk making their players peeved?” - @Mat***J***

Originally *nerf* does not start as a verb word and instead it is a name of a brand (noun). According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, Nerf is a trademark name for toys made of foam-like material that are usually played indoors. This brand name was first introduced in 1970 (Nerf ball) by a toy company. Nerf still exists even now and is still one of the well-known brands of toys for kids.

While according to the Urban Dictionary, instead of referencing a brand name, it refers to an action of reducing the effectiveness of (something, such as a character, attribute, or weapon) in a video game to balance out a game. The shifted meaning fits more in the context of what the user is trying to convey in the tweets.

The shift in the meanings shows how a term is first known as just a brand or name, but now, when looking at the word, it can also refer to an action that is often found in a gaming context. From a brand name to a metaphor for balancing mechanics of a game, the term now can be applied broadly to any element that is being weakened in a game. Therefore, it can be categorized that the term *nerf* falls into the semantic change pattern of broadening.

- Narrowing – Pro

*“For sure  have you ever seen a **pro** mobile gamer?! They're insane!!!” - @A***3H***s*

The word *pro*, shortened from the word ‘professional,’ according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary is refers to a person who is proficient in their work or actions, especially to a person who engages in a pursuit or activity professionally. According to the Urban Dictionary, however, the term *pro* in a gaming context refers to someone who is specifically very skillful and good at playing a game. It means that the person being referred to as a pro specifically refers to a ‘skillful’ gamer.

From the two meanings, there is a change in the scope and quantity of what the term *pro* might refer to. The first meaning could refer to just anyone as a professional from many fields, no matter what the profession is. While the second meaning, as it falls to the gaming context, as according to the tweet, is restricted to only a gaming expertise and no other profession, making it only refer to one specific field, which is gaming. This indicates that there is an identity specialization when the word is used in the gaming context, with how the quantity of the word can be referred to, is reduced to just one specific field. Therefore, the term *pro* that is used in this tweet can be categorized as a pattern of narrowing.

4. Discussion

Based on the findings of this article, the semantic change pattern of Pejoration has emerged as the most dominant pattern to be found among English gaming slang on Twitter. Out of the 28 slang terms analyzed, there are 10 (35.7%) terms that show a shift in meaning from neutral or mildly descriptive into explicitly negative or mocking descriptive, which qualifies them as pejorative terms. Terms such as noob, scrub, salty, troll, and mid all showcase how slang in the gaming community is often shaped by competitive, mocking, or ironic discourse.

This dominant use of pejorative expressions offers insights into the self-constructed image of the gaming community, as well as how it is interpreted by the wider social media public. Semantic change within the Twitter gaming community is not arbitrary. It is reflective of community values and power dynamics. Pejoration being the most dominant indicates the high valuation of performance, with language being used to shame or ostracize poor performers. These terms function not just as insults but also as tools of in-group assessment, identity shaping, and boundary setting. This linguistic tendency helps reveal a few key aspects about the gaming community image. Such as:

- **Highly Competitive Culture**

In the gaming environment, especially in a multiplayer or PvP (player versus player) setting, everything is about performance, efficiency, strategy, and quick thinking. Pejoratives from jargon Slang terms like noob or scrub reflects supremacy mindset in video game culture, where a skillful person is praised and an untalented person or a failure is ridiculed. Language becomes a way of enforcing competitiveness, often harshly.

For example, the slang scrub used to refer to an action instead of a derogatory term. Sayings such as “Are you a pro or a scrub?” are frequently used to ask whether a player is skillful or not. This shows that gamer has the mindset that only high-skilled people will earn respect, while those who fail invite ridicule.

- **Normalization of Mockery and Trash-talk**

Terms like salty, troll, or owned are coded to indicate a culture that uses humor, sarcasm, and ridicule as a coping mechanism and social dynamic. This normalization of playful (or often hostile) mockery forms a unique identity among gamers where emotional reactions are publicly labeled, often to mitigate potential vulnerability. This use of pejorative terms as a joke reveals the community’s informal, meme-driven, and emotionally expressive communication style.

For example, the word troll. When someone says “Look, it’s a troll,” one would originally refer to a mythical creature that is often described as ugly, grotesque, and dangerous. But due to the shifted meaning, one will often think of the troll not as a mythical creature, but as a person who intentionally provokes others online to cause annoyance or anger.

- **In-group elitism and gatekeeping**

The widespread use of pejorative slang also highlights the presence of gatekeeping behaviors. The use of words like meta or cap that only an insider or experienced gamer can

understand the context of, asserts linguistic superiority and cultural awareness. This humiliates novices and casual players of video games or those outside the community. These terms help preserve a shared subcultural code, strengthening group identity at the expense of inclusivity.

For example, the use of the word meta. When one says “it’s meta,” originally, people will perceive it as something “beyond” or a term that is often used in academic or philosophical contexts, such as metaphysics or maybe metadata. In the gaming context itself, there has been a shift in meaning where meta took on a more specific gaming context to its meaning, which is referring to meta as an acronym of the most effective tactics available. When gamers come across the word meta, they would immediately think of powerful gaming characters or strategy.

Slang is not merely functional but creative. It enables compression of meaning, emotional communication, and humor in a fast-paced, text-based medium. Importantly, these linguistic trends align with Twitter's technological affordances which is immediacy, conciseness, and virality. Twitter slang must be fast, expressive, and recognizable. Semantic shifts therefore tend to mirror the pace and spectacle of the game play itself, which is fast paced and concise.

By examining how meanings shift in a niche online community, we gain insight into broader linguistic and cultural processes in digital media. Future research might explore pragmatic functions of gaming slang, cross-platform comparison such as Reddit, Discord, Twitch, or TikTok, which could potentially demonstrate different slang patterns and different usage contexts. Furthermore, follow-up research could employ quantitative methodology (e.g., frequency analysis or corpus linguistic tools) to supplement the qualitative findings, thereby allowing wider generalization.

5. Conclusions

This study explored semantic change in slang used by the Twitter gaming community. The results reveal shifts in both linguistic structures and meanings, showing that previously neutral words can gradually acquire negative connotations, as found in pejoration. Pejoration was also found to be the most dominant pattern. The prevalence of pejoration in semantic changes reflects the socially constructed and competitive nature of gaming culture, where language functions as a tool for critique, ridicule, and in-group solidarity. Terms such as *noob*, *scrub*, *troll*, and *salty* demonstrate how gamers evaluate performance, regulate emotional responses, and establish social hierarchies.

The findings indicate that the semantic change in slang used by the Twitter gaming community is not random, but emerges from ongoing social negotiations of meaning that reinforce group identity while often excluding outsiders. This highlights how digital language serves as a powerful reflection of the behaviors, values, and discourse practices of online communities.

While this study effectively explores one specific online community, future research could compare semantic change patterns across different online subcultures, as each online community has its own norms, identities, and social structures reflected in their language use. Considering additional factors such as gender and cultural background could also enrich the discussion of Twitter gaming community. Moreover, incorporating multimodal analysis reveal how images, memes, and other non-textual elements interact with linguistic change in shaping community identity.

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