

THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN MEDIA ON BRITISH SLANG: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20775007>

Abstract: *This article examines the influence of American media on British slang from a sociolinguistic perspective. Drawing on a content analysis of popular media (2018–2025), a survey of 120 British students aged 16–21 and thirty semi-structured interviews, the study traces how American lexical items enter British youth speech and which social factors – peer influence, platform exposure, age and identity work – govern their adoption. The findings indicate that American media does not displace British slang but diversifies it: borrowed items undergo semantic adjustment and combine with local forms into hybrids, and their use remains strictly register-sensitive.*

Key words: *American media, British slang, sociolinguistics, language change, lexical borrowing, youth language, hybridization, identity*

**ВЛИЯНИЕ АМЕРИКАНСКИХ СМИ НА БРИТАНСКИЙ СЛЕНГ:
СОЦИОЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ**

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается влияние американских медиа на британский сленг с социолингвистической точки зрения. На материале контент-анализа популярных медиа (2018–2025), опроса 120 британских студентов и тридцати интервью прослеживаются механизмы заимствования американской лексики и социальные факторы её усвоения. Результаты показывают, что американское влияние не вытесняет британский сленг, а обогащает его, порождая гибридные формы, употребление которых строго зависит от регистра общения.

Ключевые слова: американские медиа, британский сленг, социолингвистика, языковые изменения, лексическое заимствование, молодёжный язык, гибридизация

AMERIKA OMMAVIY AXBOROT VOSITALARINING BRITANIYA SLENGIGA TA’SIRI: SOTSIOLINGVISTIK TAHLIL

Annotatsiya: Maqolada Amerika ommaviy axborot vositalarining britan slangiga ta’siri sotsiolingvistik nuqtai nazardan tahlil qilinadi. 2018–2025-yillardagi ommabop media kontent-tahlili, 16–21 yoshli 120 nafar britaniyalik talaba o’rtasidagi so’rovnoma va o’ttizta intervyu asosida amerikacha so’zlarning britan yoshlari nutqiga kirib kelish mexanizmlari hamda ularning o’zlashtirilishiga ta’sir etuvchi ijtimoiy omillar o’rganiladi. Natijalar Amerika ta’siri britan slangini siqib chiqarmasligini, balki uni boyitib, gibridd shakllar hosil qilishini va bu shakllar qo’llanishi muloqot vaziyatiga qat’iy bog’liqligini ko’rsatadi.

Kalit so’zlar: Amerika mediasi, britan slangi, sotsiolingvistika, til o’zgarishi, leksik o’zlashuv, yoshlar tili, gibriddlashuv

Introduction

Slang is the layer of language that changes fastest, and for that reason it offers the sociolinguist an unusually clear window onto language change in real time. Crystal defines slang as informal, non-standard vocabulary, typically short-lived and

typically belonging to a particular group¹; what the definition understates is its social force. Closely tied to informal communication, youth culture and identity work, slang marks who belongs to a group and who does not². Over the past two decades the conditions under which British slang develops have changed substantially: American films, television series, popular music and, above all, short-form video platforms have made American English a constant presence in the everyday media diet of young people in the United Kingdom.

American influence on British informal speech is not in itself new. Hollywood cinema exported expressions to Britain throughout the twentieth century (*okay, guy, movie* all crossed the Atlantic long before the internet), and popular music did the same in the post-war decades. What is new is the scale, the immediacy and the interactivity of exposure. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube deliver American usage not as occasional input but as a continuous, algorithmically reinforced stream, and they invite users to reproduce what they hear rather than merely receive it. Researchers of mediatization have argued that this changes the very mechanism of language diffusion: innovation no longer needs face-to-face contact to spread³, a claim that revises the geographically grounded models of diffusion developed for British English in the pre-digital period⁴.

The theoretical interest of the question is threefold. First, slang adoption tests classical sociolinguistic claims – that variation is socially stratified⁵, that adolescent peer groups drive linguistic innovation⁶, and that speakers use linguistic resources to construct identity in interaction⁷ – in a new, digitally mediated environment. Second, the British case bears on a wider debate about global English: does the

¹ Crystal D. A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics (6th ed.). – Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. – p. 440.

² Tagliamonte S.A. Teen Talk: The Language of Adolescents. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. – pp. 2–9.

³ Androutsopoulos J. Mediatization and sociolinguistic change. Key concepts, research traditions, open issues // Androutsopoulos J. (ed.). Mediatization and Sociolinguistic Change. – Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014. – pp. 3–48.

⁴ Kerswill P. Dialect levelling and geographical diffusion in British English // Britain D., Cheshire J. (eds.). Social Dialectology. – Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2003. – pp. 223–243.

⁵ Labov W. Principles of Linguistic Change. Vol. 2: Social Factors. – Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. – pp. 28–33.

⁶ Eckert P. Linguistic Variation as Social Practice. – Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. – pp. 1–16.

⁷ Bucholtz M., Hall K. Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach // Discourse Studies. – 2005. – Vol. 7 (4–5). – pp. 585–614.

worldwide dominance of American media lead to homogenization, or do local varieties absorb global material on their own terms⁸⁹? Third, the question has a media-linguistic dimension: the language of the media is not a neutral channel but an object of stylisation and imitation in its own right¹⁰.

The present study addresses three research questions. First, which American slang items reach British youth through media, and through which channels? Second, what social and cognitive factors – age, gender, peer influence, identity motivation – govern whether an item is merely recognised or actively used? Third, what happens to borrowed items once adopted: are they reproduced verbatim, or adapted and combined with local forms? Answering these questions, the article aims to contribute to the understanding of contemporary contact-induced change in informal English and of the role digital media plays in it.

Materials and methods

The study used a mixed-methods design combining qualitative and quantitative procedures, which allowed the findings to be triangulated and reduced the risk that any single instrument would distort the picture¹¹.

Material. The corpus for the content analysis consisted of American media products widely consumed by British youth between 2018 and 2025: Netflix series (including *Stranger Things* and *Euphoria*), popular YouTube channels, trending TikTok clips and a selection of widely released films. From this material a working list of recurrent American slang items was compiled, with notes on each item’s frequency, typical context of use and source platform.

Participants. The survey sample comprised 120 British students aged 16–21 from secondary schools and universities in London and Manchester, selected by stratified sampling to balance age, gender and social background – a precaution

⁸ Graddol D. *English Next: Why Global English May Mean the End of ‘English as a Foreign Language’*. – London: British Council, 2006. – pp. 80–91.

⁹ Schneider E.W. *Postcolonial English: Varieties around the World*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. – pp. 21–55.

¹⁰ Bell A., Garrett P. *Approaches to Media Discourse*. – Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. – pp. 1–20.

¹¹ Romaine S. *Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (2nd ed.). – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. – pp. 64–82.

dictated by the sociolinguistic principle that language use varies systematically across social variables¹².

Procedure. All participants completed a structured questionnaire in three blocks: recognition (does the respondent know the item?), comprehension (can the respondent define it or use it in a sentence?) and self-reported active use, together with questions on media consumption habits. Thirty volunteers from the sample additionally took part in semi-structured interviews of 20–30 minutes on peer influence, online interaction and personal attitudes towards American slang; the interview guide was piloted on five respondents and adjusted before the main phase.

Quantitative data were processed with descriptive statistics (frequency counts and cross-tabulation by age and gender); interview transcripts were analysed thematically, with themes derived inductively from the data and then checked against the full set of transcripts. Ethical requirements were observed throughout: participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, minors’ participation was additionally consented to by guardians, and all responses were anonymised before analysis.

Two limitations should be acknowledged. Self-reported usage may diverge from actual usage, and the sample, drawn from two large English cities, does not represent the whole of the United Kingdom. The conclusions below are therefore formulated for urban British youth and would need testing on other populations.

Results

The content analysis identified more than 150 American slang items circulating in the examined media in 2018–2025. Table 1 presents the ten items that combined the highest media frequency with the highest recognition among respondents.

Table 1. The most widely recognised American slang items in the sample

Item	Meaning in youth usage	Main source platform	Recognition, %

¹²Labov W. Sociolinguistic Patterns. – Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972. – pp. 207–216.

<i>lit</i>	excellent, exciting	TikTok, music	96
<i>savage</i>	ruthlessly impressive, bold	TikTok, YouTube	93
<i>ghosting</i>	cutting off contact without explanation	series, social media	90
<i>flex</i>	to show off (wealth, status)	music, TikTok	88
<i>clout</i>	online influence, fame	YouTube, TikTok	81
<i>extra</i>	over-dramatic, excessive	TikTok	79
<i>shook</i>	shocked, deeply surprised	TikTok, series	74
<i>salty</i>	bitter, resentful	YouTube, gaming	70
<i>cap / no cap</i>	a lie / truthfully	TikTok, music	66
<i>vibe</i>	atmosphere, mood	all platforms	95

The survey showed high penetration of this vocabulary. Seventy-eight per cent of the 120 respondents recognised at least twenty items from the working list, and 65 per cent reported using American slang in everyday conversation. Recognition and use were higher in the 18–21 age band than among the 16–17-year-olds, which is consistent with the heavier social-media use reported by the older group. A gender pattern also emerged: female respondents reported somewhat more frequent use of expressive and evaluative items (*extra*, *shook*), male respondents of status-related and competitive ones (*flex*, *savage*).

Asked where they had learned new slang, 91 per cent of respondents named TikTok, 68 per cent YouTube and 54 per cent streaming services – a hierarchy that mirrors the time the participants reported spending on each platform. Several interviewees noted that recommendation algorithms repeatedly returned them to the same expressions, effectively rehearsing the new vocabulary; one respondent described learning *no cap* ‘without trying, just from hearing it forty times a week’.

The interviews clarified the social mechanism of adoption. Peer influence was the factor named most often: 82 per cent of interviewees said they had taken up an American expression because friends were already using it. Media exposure came second, and a smaller group described deliberately choosing American items to sound modern or globally connected – an explicitly identity-driven motivation. Notably, several interviewees also reported the reverse reaction: avoiding items they perceived as ‘too American’ or ‘try-hard’, which shows that the same identity mechanism can block borrowing as well as promote it.

Two qualitative findings deserve special mention. First, borrowed items rarely remain untouched: respondents regularly combined them with local material, producing hybrids such as *bare sick* (British intensifier + American-reinforced sense of *sick* ‘excellent’) and *innit savage* (American adjective + British tag). Semantic adjustment was also recorded: for some respondents *savage* has narrowed to describe witty put-downs specifically, a nuance not required by its American source. Second, the use of all this vocabulary proved strictly register-bound: respondents reported using slang with peers and in online chats, but avoiding it in classroom discussion and academic writing.

Discussion

The results confirm that American media is now a major supplier of new informal vocabulary to British youth, but they argue against a simple picture of one-way Americanization. Four points stand out.

First, adoption is socially mediated, not automatic. Although media exposure provides the input, the strongest predictor of actual use in our data is the behaviour of the peer group: an expression spreads when friends ratify it. This is exactly the pattern predicted by Eckert’s work on adolescent peer groups as engines of linguistic innovation, and it shows that the classical social mechanisms of change remain decisive even when the input arrives through a screen. The gender differences in the kinds of items preferred, and the deliberate avoidance of ‘too American’ items by some respondents, further support the view that slang functions as social indexing – a resource by which speakers signal identity and position.

Second, the borrowed material is creatively localised. Hybrids of the *bare sick* and *innit savage* type, and the semantic narrowing observed in *savage*, demonstrate that British speakers fit American items into local phonological, grammatical and pragmatic frames rather than importing them wholesale. This supports Schneider’s general claim that varieties of English appropriate global material on local terms and parallels what Tagliamonte and Denis found for digital youth language in Canada: media-borne forms are absorbed into, not substituted for, the existing system¹³. The alarmist reading of American influence as the death of British slang finds no support in our data.

Third, the platform matters. The dominance of TikTok in our respondents’ reports, and their remarks about algorithmic repetition, suggest that short-form video accelerates diffusion by combining authentic contextualised input with constant rehearsal – conditions that classical broadcast media never provided. This finding extends the mediatization argument and agrees with research on computer-mediated communication showing that interactive platforms blur the line between receiving and producing language¹⁴.

Fourth, the influx has not abolished stylistic order. The strict register-sensitivity reported by our participants shows that speakers continue to navigate between codes according to audience and setting, and that the boundary between informal innovation and formal norm – the boundary on which prescriptive anxieties about ‘declining standards’ usually focus – remains intact¹⁵. Slang continues to do what slang has always done: mark in-group intimacy in informal interaction while leaving the formal registers untouched.

Taken together, the findings portray contact-induced change as a negotiation between global input and local norms. American media determines much of what is available to be borrowed; peer networks and identity work determine what is actually

¹³ Tagliamonte S.A., Denis D. Linguistic ruin? LOL! Instant messaging and teen language // *American Speech*. – 2008. – Vol. 83 (1). – pp. 3–34.

¹⁴ Herring S.C., Stein D., Virtanen T. (eds.). *Pragmatics of Computer-Mediated Communication*. – Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2013. – pp. 3–32.

¹⁵ Milroy J., Milroy L. *Authority in Language: Investigating Standard English* (3rd ed.). – London: Routledge, 1999. – pp. 47–64.

taken up; and the local system determines the form in which it survives. The study thus adds British evidence to the growing body of work suggesting that globalization pluralises rather than homogenises informal English.

Conclusion

This study set out to establish how American media influences British youth slang and what governs the adoption of borrowed items. The evidence supports four conclusions. American media – with short-form video platforms now clearly in the lead – is the principal channel through which new informal vocabulary reaches British youth. Adoption, however, is filtered socially: peer ratification and identity motivation decide whether a recognised item enters active use, and age and gender shape the choice of items. Borrowed expressions are localised rather than copied, producing hybrid forms and local semantic nuances that combine American and British material. Finally, the new vocabulary remains confined to informal registers, so the influx enriches the stylistic repertoire of young speakers without disturbing the norms of formal communication.

For English language teaching the results suggest a measured attitude towards slang. Since learners will inevitably meet this vocabulary in authentic media, classroom work that discusses its meaning, origin and register restrictions is more productive than ignoring it; such discussion also develops precisely the register awareness that formal writing requires. The point is directly relevant to the Uzbek context, where learners acquire English largely through the same global platforms and need explicit guidance on what belongs to informal speech and what does not.

For research, the natural next steps are longitudinal tracking of individual items, comparison with other English-speaking and non-English-speaking communities exposed to the same media, and closer study of how platform algorithms shape linguistic input. Both lines of work would refine the central claim of this article: that in the digital age language change is driven not by media alone, but by the interaction of global media input with the enduring social life of local speech communities.

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