HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

FROM LEXICAL MEANING TO SPEAKER STANCE: PRAGMATIC RECONTEXTUALISATION OF ENGLISH DIGITAL NEOLOGISMS

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23400572

Abstract: This study investigates the pragmatic potential of selected English digital expressions documented in recent Oxford and Cambridge lexicographic reports. Focusing on rage bait, brain rot, slop, delulu, parasocial, tradwife and skibidi, it distinguishes published lexical meaning from contextually inferred interactional acts such as accusation, self-irony, affiliation and evaluation. The article introduces a six-dimensional interpretive coding model incorporating lexical sense, target, stance, participation, shared knowledge and register. Examples constructed for analytical purposes illustrate contrasts without being represented as natural corpus data. The study argues that recent lexical visibility does not necessarily entail novel coinage and that dictionary inclusion does not remove pragmatic variation. A future corpus-based validation design is outlined.

Keywords: pragmatics; neologisms; stance; evaluation; online discourse; register; English lexicology

Introduction

New and newly salient English expressions participate in social interaction not merely as labels but as resources for evaluation, humour and group alignment. The online expressions brain rot, rage bait, slop, delulu and parasocial often seem to describe aspects of digital culture. Yet their communicative effect depends on who uses them, which activity is under discussion, and whether the audience treats the expression as an inside joke, a criticism or a serious analytical term. Their linguistic interest therefore extends beyond formal novelty.

A specific analytical problem emerges when lexical definitions are taken as full explanations of meaning. Lexicographic glosses generally describe recognisable semantic cores, whereas a real utterance also creates social relations and speaker commitments. The expression rage bait denotes content designed to provoke anger and engagement; when one speaker calls another's post rage bait, however, the utterance may also question the author's sincerity. Similarly, brain rot can refer to a perceived consequence of content consumption but may be used playfully to perform self-critique rather than to assert a clinical diagnosis.

This article investigates pragmatic recontextualisation: the process by which a documented lexical item acquires interactional significance when placed in a particular discourse setting. It adopts a qualitative, theory-guided analysis of lexical items explicitly discussed in official Oxford and Cambridge material issued in 2024-2025. The research questions concern the relation between dictionary meaning and speaker stance, the role of pragmatic presuppositions in understanding emerging expressions, and the risks of equating digital circulation with universal semantic agreement.

Conceptual foundations: meaning, stance and affiliation

A useful starting point is to separate lexical denotation from evaluative positioning. The lexical sense of slop identifies low-quality material in a specified domain; its use in an utterance simultaneously rejects the cultural or technical value of that material. A hearer may recover the referent from the dictionary definition while inferring the speaker's attitude from the choice of label.

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Such implications are neither arbitrary nor permanently fixed: their exact force depends on cotext, relation between participants and available alternatives.

The second foundation concerns affiliation. Zappavigna describes how online participants become connected through publicly discoverable patterns of evaluative language and shared topics. A trending expression can consequently function as a sign that speakers recognise the same discourse world. The label delulu may convey familiarity with a playful register and encourage solidarity in one community, while seeming dismissive or incomprehensible in a more formal environment. Register cannot be inferred simply from dictionary inclusion [1; 87].

Finally, the concept of conventionalisation helps explain why recognisable interactional functions do not necessarily remain stable. Kerremans shows the importance of repeated public use in the establishment of new lexical items [2; 148]. Yet the conventionalisation of a form does not eliminate local reinterpretation. Once a label is familiar, speakers may use it ironically, quote it disapprovingly, or reapply it to novel domains. A model limited to the dictionary gloss will therefore underdescribe productive contemporary usage.

Data sources and qualitative coding scheme

The analytical sample was purposively drawn from official publisher reports concerning brain rot, rage bait, slop, parasocial, delulu, skibidi and tradwife. The selection brings together evaluative expressions, a register-shifting scholarly term, and labels linked to cultural identities or circulating memes. Oxford public statements are used for published descriptions of brain rot and rage bait, while Cambridge communications support the discussion of other items.

Each item was reviewed along six interpretive dimensions: (1) a stable descriptive core as documented by the source; (2) its typical evaluative potential; (3) possible target or referent; (4) speaker stance and evidential commitment; (5) presumed shared contextual knowledge; and (6) expected register restrictions. These dimensions constitute a proposed coding protocol rather than the output of automated annotation or observed inter-rater agreement. The case descriptions below distinguish documented lexical senses from pragmatic inferences formulated by the author [3; 241].

Methodologically, this approach controls overclaiming by refusing to supply fictional speaker metadata, invented engagement figures or platform counts. It also allows a future corpus extension to be precisely specified. Such an extension would sample public contexts over time, record source permissions and anonymisation rules, retain adjacent utterances, and code function at the level of the turn sequence. This would make it possible to test which of the proposed functions recur in naturally occurring usage.

Pragmatic patterns I: accusation, evaluation and self-positioning

Rage bait combines a referential meaning with an attribution of purpose. Calling a post rage bait commonly implies more than that it made someone angry: it suggests a communicative strategy designed to harvest attention. This attribution can be contested, especially when a criticism is genuine but is characterised as manipulative. The distinction between an intended emotional trigger and a recipient's incidental anger is central to interpretation. Oxford University Press defines rage bait in relation to deliberately provocative engagement-seeking content, supporting the relevance of intention (Oxford University Press, 2025).

Brain rot is more mobile. The expression may name allegedly low-value content, a perceived cognitive consequence, or a speaker's self-mocking experience of prolonged scrolling. The author-generated statement 'My feed gave me brain rot today' need not entail that measurable neurological deterioration occurred. It can be analysed instead as hyperbolic self-evaluation. Oxford's historical account underlines that the expression predates the internet, although its digital association became prominent in recent years [5; 172].

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These items demonstrate the need for two analytical layers. The semantic layer asks what a term conventionally designates. The pragmatic layer asks what social action an utterance performs: accusation, distancing, humorous confession, criticism or alignment. The same lexical item can support multiple actions, and a single action may be expressed through alternative vocabulary. A scientifically responsible study must therefore avoid coding every use of a term as one obligatory pragmatic function.

Pragmatic patterns II: identity, intimacy and contextual dependence

Delulu is especially revealing because its informality and expressive shape make register a central component of interpretation. Cambridge's decision to document the expression indicates that it has moved beyond being invisible to mainstream lexicographic practice, but it does not establish a single stable affective reading. A friendly comment such as 'We're all a little delulu about the concert' can signal playful camaraderie. A sharply addressed 'You're delulu' may function as criticism. Both utterances are researcher-created contrasts and neither provides a basis for claims about relative prevalence.

Parasocial has a different communicative history. Originating in scholarly discussion of mediated intimacy, it now circulates in broader conversations about celebrities, creators and AI systems. A statement like 'That is a parasocial relationship' can name a social phenomenon; in a conflict, the same formulation may become a discrediting judgement about another person's emotional involvement. This shift does not change the historical origin of the term, but it changes the social consequences of using it.

Tradwife involves identity description and positioning with respect to gendered social expectations. The utterance's stance may depend on whether it comes from self-identification, journalistic description, critique or satire. An analyst should neither presume that every user endorses the concept nor treat the label as ideologically neutral in all settings. Instead, source and participation role must be included in the annotation. Cambridge's record of the term establishes its lexicographic presence, not a uniform evaluation across communities.

Skibidi illustrates limits of purely propositional interpretation. In some contexts the item works as a recognisable cultural reference or flexible evaluation rather than as a stable, transparently compositional predicate. Successful interpretation can depend on shared exposure to online video cultures. Its rapid circulation should not be simplified into a claim that every usage has the same lexical meaning. Together, these cases show that pragmatic competence involves recognising both formal register and the distribution of shared background knowledge.

Discussion: from lexical entry to interactional evidence

Three analytical principles follow from the case study. First, dictionary documentation is an appropriate starting point for stable senses but not a substitute for naturally occurring exchange. Second, pragmatic categories require contextual evidence: an attribution of ulterior motives is different from a neutral description, while friendly irony differs from hostile sarcasm. Third, lexical history matters because both newly coined forms and recontextualised older terms can function as signs of contemporary identity.

The practical consequence is a multi-layer annotation procedure. Researchers should record an expression's formal type and published semantic core, then document the utterance, adjacent turns, participation roles, identifiable target, attitude polarity, possible irony and uncertainty of interpretation. Where intention cannot be established, 'accusation of intention' is preferable to declaring the criticised author's actual intention. Ambiguous cases should be retained rather than eliminated merely to make the data appear categorical.

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The contribution to second-language teaching is equally concrete. Learners should not be encouraged to insert trendy words indiscriminately into academic prose. Instead, they can compare an expression's dictionary sense with contrasting sample exchanges, identify possible unintended offensiveness and rephrase the communicative intention in a neutral register. Such exercises distinguish lexical recognition from socially appropriate production. Words like parasocial and rage bait are valuable teaching resources because their use invites discussion of intention, evidence, stance and interactional accountability.

Conclusion and research agenda

Emerging and newly prominent English vocabulary is most adequately described through a combination of lexical semantics and pragmatic analysis. The selected expressions show that a recognisable form may function as accusation, self-irony, affiliation, distancing or evaluation according to its local use. The historical cases brain rot and parasocial also demonstrate that recent visibility does not prove recent coinage. The main theoretical claim is consequently modest but important: lexical innovation and pragmatic innovation overlap, yet they are analytically separable.

This paper offers a documented, qualitative interpretation of selected entries and an explicit annotation scheme. It does not present representative user data, infer the intentions of real speakers, or calculate the frequency of any function. The next research step is a carefully sampled collection of ethically sourced public interactional contexts, analysed in their surrounding turns and compared across periods and platforms. Such work could determine where pragmatic specialisation is stable, where variation persists, and how an expression's lexical and interpersonal histories influence one another.

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