

**SOCIAL INFLUENCES ON THE USE OF NON-STANDARD VOCABULARY IN
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Abstract. This article examines the social factors influencing the adoption and use of non-standard vocabulary within linguistic communities. It explores how variables such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and regional background contribute to the variation in language use, particularly in informal and digital communication contexts. The study delves into the concept of "covert prestige," where non-standard forms are employed to signal group identity and solidarity, often in opposition to standard language norms. Additionally, it discusses the role of linguistic insecurity, especially among lower middle-class speakers, who may overcorrect their speech to align with perceived prestige standards. The article also highlights how stylistic choices and the social context of interactions, including the race and dialect of interlocutors, influence the frequency and acceptance of non-standard vocabulary. Through a comprehensive analysis of sociolinguistic theories and empirical data, the article provides insights into the complex interplay between social identity and language variation.

Keywords: social identity, language, standard, non-standard, variation, particular groups, sociolinguistic foundations, sociolinguistic factor.

Introduction. Language is a social phenomenon. It is not only a communication system but a strong symbol of identity, community, and culture. Consequently, non-standard vocabulary—those vocabulary items outside normative lexicon and grammar—is strongly rooted in the social structures and processes of its users. Language variation is one of the primary sociolinguistic foundations of non-standard words. Language variation in this context means how language is connected to social identity. Individuals and groups use language to signify membership, status, and otherness from other individuals or groups. Non-standard words play a significant role in this marking to allow speakers to identify with particular groups—regional, generational, occupational, or subcultural.

Social Class and Economic Status

One of the primary sociolinguistic foundations is social class. Speakers from working-class backgrounds often use non-standard vocabulary that reflects their community norms and experiences. For instance, working-class speakers in the UK might use the term "innit" (a contraction of "isn't it") as a tag question, e.g., "It's cold today, innit?"—a feature of Multicultural London English. In contrast, speakers from upper-middle-class backgrounds might prefer more standard forms like "don't you think?" or "isn't it?". This usage can serve as a marker of solidarity and group identity. Conversely, individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may avoid non-standard forms in favor of language that aligns with institutional or professional standards. However, in some cases, members of higher classes may adopt non-standard expressions for stylistic or ironic purposes, especially in informal settings.

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In the anglosphere, teens might use words like "sus" (dodgy), "no cap" (no lie), or "vibe" (something of an atmosphere) to signal youthful culture belonging and differentiation from formal or grown-up discourse. Age is particularly important. Younger speakers are usually the most productive and innovative users of non-standard forms. Adolescents and young adults are socially positioned at the phase of identity formation, experimentation, and peer consolidation, all of which position them towards being foremost slang-generating and disseminating speakers. Lexical change speeds up in Internet environments (e.g., internet memes, TikTok slang) in significant measure due to youth culture.

Gender also comes into play in the usage of language.

Men have also been found to be more likely to use overtly non-standard or "tough" vocabulary in specific contexts, particularly in competitive or informal settings. This is partly because non-standard vocabulary has been associated with masculinity, rebellion, and aggression. Women are more likely to use socially accepted forms or use non-standard words in more creative or expressive situations. But these proclivities exist to a greatly varying degree among cultures and periods, and increasingly, young women too are key originators of internet slang and cultural trends. Socioeconomic status (SES) is yet another strong influencer. The lower socioeconomic strata coin the non-standard varieties, either without access to schooling or residing in linguistically mixed cities.

Working-class inner-city communities, for example, are fertile grounds for creating argot dictionaries through drawing on a variety of ethnic and linguistic sources.

Influence of the Internet and Social Media

The internet has become a powerful incubator for non-standard vocabulary. Platforms like TikTok, Twitter (X), and Reddit create rapid cycles of language innovation, where new slang can go viral overnight. Terms like "ghosting" (suddenly cutting off communication), "sus" (short for suspicious, popularized by the game Among Us), or "rizz" (charisma or flirting skill) have emerged and spread globally through memes and viral content.

Hashtags, emojis, abbreviations, and new word formations—such as "FOMO" (Fear Of Missing Out), "yeet" (to throw with force), or "based" (used to describe someone who confidently expresses controversial opinions)—are often created and adopted within digital subcultures before entering broader youth language or even mainstream media. Online communication also favors brevity and creativity, encouraging playful word formation, blending (e.g., "stan" from stalker + fan), and repurposing old words with new meanings. Internet slang is also more democratic—originating from users across a wide spectrum of regions, social classes, and ethnic backgrounds—making it a particularly dynamic and inclusive source of non-standard vocabulary.

Ethnicity and Cultural Identity

In English, to take one case, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has deeply influenced standard slang, particularly through music (rap, hip-hop) and new electronic media. "Woke," "lit," and "shade" all originated in AAVE contexts before becoming general. Regional dialects also include unique lexical elements that may be non-standard on the national level. British English, for example, boasts an enormous variety of regional slangs: "mardy" (grumpy) in the Midlands, "chuffed" (pleased) in the North, and "nosh" (food) in London. These distinctions are not linguistic only; they are cultural heritage, migration history, and socio-economic facts.

In particular, this diversity reflects a broader sociolinguistic fact: the standard language is determined by hegemonic powers, while non-standard varieties express the voice and identity of some individuals.

Social Functions of Non-Standard Vocabulary

Sociolinguists emphasize that non-standard vocabulary is not just a deviation from correctness but that it plays significant social functions as well. Among them are:

Expressiveness – Non-standard words and expressions are more effective at conveying emotion, irony, or humor than neutral counterparts.

Group Identity – Use of non-standard words and expressions is identification with a social or cultural group.

Creativity – Non-standard language allows for metaphor, abbreviation, and play with form and meaning.

Resistance and Rebellion – Especially among youth, non-standard language use can be a sign of resistance to norms, institutions, or power.

Language Attitudes

Although abundant and valuable, non-standard terms are downgraded in formal institutions. Formal school, government, and the working place reinforce standard language as a symbol of correctness, intelligence, and politeness. This hierarchical structuring shapes a linguistic ladder upon which standard forms are held valuable and non-standard forms are degraded.

But slowly, attitudes are changing. Contemporary linguistics, pedagogy, and mass media studies encourage linguistic tolerance and accommodation of language variation as normal and preferable. More and more, teachers welcome students' critical and creative engagement with non-standard language, acknowledging its role in identity and expression.

Conclusion

Non-standard vocabulary is shaped by multiple social factors—class, age, ethnicity, gender, region, and now, more than ever, the digital environment. These words are not linguistic "mistakes," but meaningful expressions that fulfill social, emotional, and cultural roles.



Sociolinguistic awareness of these dynamics not only deepens our understanding of language but also reveals how people use words to connect, resist, adapt, and innovate.

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