

Digital Lexicon: The Impact of Social Media Neologisms on Students' Linguistic Proficiency

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of social media-induced neologisms on the linguistic proficiency of university students in Cameroon. With the widespread use of platforms like Twitter (now X), TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, slang terms and abbreviations collectively termed neologisms have become part of students' daily communication. While these terms foster informal expression and social bonding, their use in academic writing undermines grammatical accuracy, lexical appropriateness, spelling, coherence, and formal tone. Drawing on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly Register Theory, this research analyses the written output of 200 first- and second-year university students, identifying 645 neologism occurrences across 55 distinct types. A coding scheme tracks the frequency, form, and syntactic roles of these neologisms, with attention to their ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. A structured survey also explores students' metalinguistic awareness, language habits on social media, and ability to distinguish between formal and informal registers. Findings show a strong presence of neologisms such as "4u," "ghosted," "vibes," "nerve," and "low-key" in formal assignments, leading to inappropriate register use and reduced clarity. Many students demonstrate "register flattening," struggling to shift between informal digital language and formal academic expression. While the study acknowledges the creative and identity-shaping value of social media neologisms, it highlights their negative effects on academic writing standards. The research recommends targeted pedagogical interventions to build register awareness and strengthen formal writing skills. Though linguistic innovation reflects cultural change, academic success requires mastery of formal communication norms; promoting register awareness is therefore essential for maintaining academic standards.

Keywords: Social Media, Neologisms, Register, Language Proficiency, Digital Discourse

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Introduction

In the digital age, social media has emerged as a dominant force reshaping the way people communicate, interact, and express themselves, particularly among younger populations such as students. Platforms like X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp not only enable instant global communication but also serve as fertile ground for the creation and rapid dissemination of new words, phrases, and abbreviations commonly referred to as neologisms. In linguistic terms, neologisms are newly coined terms, expressions, or usages that may not yet be recorded in conventional dictionaries or conform to standard language norms but have achieved widespread usage within online communities (Nguyen & Rosé, 2011).

These linguistic innovations often emerge from creative manipulation of language for brevity, humour, identity construction, or group solidarity (Androutsopoulos, 2013; Tagliamonte, 2016). They may appear as abbreviations (e.g., "LOL," "BRB"), blends (e.g., "hangry" from

hungry + angry), respellings (e.g., “kewl” for cool), or entirely new lexical items (e.g., “slay,” “ghosting,” “rizz”). While language change is a well-documented and natural process shaped by societal transformations (Janda & Joseph, 2003), scholars have expressed concern that the unprecedented pace and scale of lexical innovation on digital platforms may have adverse implications for standard language proficiency, particularly among students whose academic success depends on formal language mastery (Saville-Troike, 1984).

The research problem addressed in this study is grounded in the hypothesis that frequent use of social media-induced neologisms negatively affects students’ command of standard grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and writing conventions. This is significant because linguistic competence especially in the standard variety has been shown to be a key determinant of academic achievement, cognitive development, and employability (Cummins, 2000; Snow, 2014). There is growing evidence that students increasingly struggle to differentiate between informal, context-specific digital slang and formal linguistic structures required in academic writing, public speaking, and professional discourse (Tagliamonte, 2016).

This “register confusion” can lead to reduced lexical richness, spelling errors, grammatical inconsistencies, and diminished clarity in expressing complex ideas. Moreover, the prevalence of phonetically driven, fragmented, or visually stylized language on social media may hinder the internalization of normative grammatical and orthographic rules (Androutsopoulos, 2006). The primary aim of this research is to examine the linguistic impact of social media-induced neologisms on tertiary-level students in English-medium institutions, focusing on their usage patterns, perceptions, and written output.

By establishing correlations between high-frequency neologism use and declining standard language competence, this study addresses broader concerns about the sustainability of linguistic standards in the face of rapid lexical innovation. While acknowledging the sociolinguistic benefits of digital creativity and peer bonding, the study emphasizes the potential long-term deficiencies that may arise from overreliance on informal, context-bound expressions. Positioned within the wider body of research on language change, digital discourse, and literacy practices, this work contributes to pedagogical strategies aimed at safeguarding standard language proficiency in an increasingly digitized communicative landscape (Kumar, 2023).

Literature Review

The intersection of social media language and linguistic proficiency has garnered significant scholarly attention over the past two decades. This literature review synthesizes existing research under two thematic areas: social media as a site of linguistic innovation and identity construction, and social media’s impact on formal language proficiency.

Social Media as a Site of Linguistic Innovation and Identity Construction

Social media platforms have been recognized as dynamic spaces for linguistic creativity and identity expression. Suradi et al. (2024) highlight how digital platforms enable spontaneous lexical innovations, allowing users to construct meaning and identity in novel ways. Ampofo (2023) views platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter as linguistic playgrounds where conventions are fluid and users draw on multimodal resources to construct highly contextualized identities.

Similarly, Androutsopoulos (2006) examine how youth subcultures utilize neologisms to construct social belonging and cultural capital online, serving communicative functions such

as group cohesion and self-representation. Online discourse fosters stylistic diversity, facilitating linguistic experimentation and the hybridization of dialects and sociolects. While these studies celebrate the affordances of digital platforms for linguistic innovation, they often focus on social functions rather than implications for formal linguistic competence.

Social Media and the Erosion of Formal Language Proficiency

Another strand of research raises concerns about the influence of digital language on formal language skills, especially among youth. Khan & Ahmad (2024) argue that constant exposure to informal online writing weakens metalinguistic awareness, blurs boundaries between formal and informal registers, and leads to decreased grammatical accuracy and limited vocabulary breadth in academic contexts. Al-Kadi (2019) present evidence of the incorporation of informal vocabulary, emoticons, and abbreviated forms in students' written assessments, which deviate from traditional academic writing norms and correlate with poor academic writing outcomes. Studies by Okudo (2016); Connell et al. (2021) explore the impact of social media on language use and proficiency in Nigeria, highlighting the erosion of register control and potential long-term linguistic deficiencies. A key theme across these works is the challenge of maintaining formal language proficiency in the face of increasing social media influence.

The current study bridges these two debates by examining the linguistic impact of social media-induced neologisms on students, particularly in academic writing. While acknowledging the creative potential of social media neologisms, it shifts the analytical focus to the practical linguistic consequences in formal contexts. Methodologically, it employs corpus analysis and structured surveys across a sample of 200 first- and second-year university students, allowing for a quantifiable assessment of neologism transfer and its grammatical and stylistic implications. By integrating survey data on students' awareness and attitudes toward their own language use, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the intersection between social media language and linguistic proficiency, and demonstrates that the same linguistic innovations celebrated in digital contexts may carry unintended costs in formal educational settings.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly his Register Theory, as the central framework of analysis. Halliday (2006) conceptualizes language as a social semiotic system, in which linguistic forms are not arbitrary but functionally motivated by the context in which communication occurs. Within this theoretical orientation, Register Theory provides a robust model for examining how language varies according to three situational variables: field (the nature of the social activity), tenor (the relationships among participants), and mode (the channel and degree of language formality).

The theoretical premise of this study is that social media neologisms, shaped in informal, digital contexts characterized by peer-to-peer interaction and ephemeral communication, pose challenges when transferred into the formal, structured, and evaluative domain of academic writing, where distinct register expectations prevail. The theoretical strength of Register Theory lies in its capacity to link linguistic choices to their appropriateness within specific situational contexts, making it particularly suitable for analysing the contextual violations that occur when students import social media expressions into academic prose. To operationalize this framework, the present study analysed the written production of 200 undergraduate students 100 from first year and 100 from second year in response to writing tasks designed to elicit formal academic writing.

In line with the Hallidayan framework, each neologism was evaluated for its ideational function (the meaning content it conveys), interpersonal function (its role in establishing writer-reader relations), and textual function (its contribution to cohesion and thematic development). This enabled the study to assess how each neologism either disrupted or supported the rhetorical goals of the text. Register breaches were identified where the linguistic features deviated significantly from the genre expectations of formal academic discourse, particularly when they introduced colloquial tone, ambiguity, or syntactic disjunction further enriching the analysis, a survey was administered to all participants to capture their metalinguistic awareness and attitudes towards their own language practices.

This dual-layered approach textual and attitudinal allowed the study to link empirical evidence of neologism usage with students' motivations, awareness levels, and adaptive capacities. The integration of coding strategies, functional analysis, and survey data produced a multidimensional view of the register violations caused by social media neologisms in academic writing. The framework proved particularly useful in identifying not only lexical and grammatical interference but also subtler disruptions in tone, cohesion, and academic stance. By deploying Register Theory in this fashion, the present study offers a theoretically grounded, methodologically rigorous, and context-sensitive contribution to the growing field of research on digital language practices and their implications for educational literacy.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining corpus-based linguistic analysis and survey data to examine the influence of neologisms specifically those derived from social media on students' language proficiency. A purposive sample of 200 academic writings was collected from first- and second-year university students enrolled in compulsory academic writing or communication skills courses from the departments of English, Bilingual lettres, linguistics, and communication in the year 2024 - 2025. The mean of all the writings was 500 words making a total of 10,000 words for our entire corpus. The students had to choose between writing a letter to a friend or a dialogue with a friend on a topic of their choice. The students were informed that it was an assignment to mark their admission in the course. The students were also asked to remain natural while expressing their feelings and thoughts through their writing. Additionally, a structured survey instrument was administered to all participants to collect data on their daily social media usage, preferred platforms, linguistic practices online, and self-perceived language proficiency. The survey also included questions on the frequency of neologism usage and perceived appropriateness in academic contexts. All writings were transcribed and uploaded into Nvivo 14 software for qualitative data management and linguistic annotation. An inductive and deductive coding approach was adopted, identifying all lexical items that deviated from Standard English norms, with particular attention to emerging lexical forms, respellings, abbreviations, and register violations. These were categorized into five neologism types: abbreviated forms, phonetic/orthographic variants, slang and idiomatic expressions, semantic shifts, and blended or hybrid forms. Each instance was coded based on its function, frequency, syntactic placement, and contextual appropriateness. A five-point linguistic rubric was also applied to assess the writings across key domains: vocabulary precision, register control, grammaticality, spelling, and coherence. The coded data were analyzed using Halliday's Language Register Theory as the conceptual lens to evaluate the students' ability to shift between informal (social media) and formal (academic) registers. The survey results were statistically analyzed and used to triangulate linguistic data, identifying patterns between high-frequency social media use and linguistic errors. This integrative

methodology allowed for robust correlations between digital language habits and academic language degradation, enhancing the validity of the findings.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study, grounded in Halliday’s Language Register Theory, and offers an interpretative discussion of how the prevalence of neologisms specifically those proliferated through social media negatively affects linguistic proficiency among university students. The analysis encompasses the identification and classification of neologisms across 200 academic writing samples, correlates their usage with proficiency deficits across key linguistic domains, and discusses implications for academic literacy development.

Identification and Prevalence of Neologisms in Academic Writing

A comprehensive examination of the students' written academic outputs revealed the frequent and, in many cases, uncontextualised use of neologisms typically associated with social media discourse. These neologisms manifested as abbreviations, lexical blends, coinages, respelled words, and semantic shifts. The recurrent items included:

Abbreviated forms and acronyms: LOL (laughing out loud), IDK (I don’t know), OMG (oh my God), DM (direct message)

Phonetic spellings and shortenings: u (you), r (are), b4 (before), 2day (today), gr8 (great), luv (love), cuz (because), tho (though), nite (night), gud (good), dat (that).

Colloquialisms and popular slang: ghosted (suddenly stopped communicating), slay (perform impressively or look stylish), cap/no cap (lie/truth), rizz (charisma or romantic appeal), vibe (emotional atmosphere), lit (exciting or excellent), flex (show off), sus (suspicious), clapback (retort), savage (bold or disrespectfully honest), yeet (to throw energetically), nerve (to be annoyed), snatched (stylish or perfect appearance), drip (fashionable appearance), ship (to support a romantic relationship), stan (devoted fan), simp (someone who does too much for someone they like), hangry (irritated due to hunger), adulting (managing responsibilities of adulthood).

Table 1. Neologism Type and Frequency

	Neologism Type	Neologism	Frequency
1.	Abbreviated Forms	LOL (laughing out loud)	45
2.	Abbreviated Forms	OMG (oh my God)	32
3.	Abbreviated Forms	IDK (I don’t know)	28
4.	Abbreviated Forms	DM (direct message)	15
5.	Abbreviated Forms	TBH (to be honest)	21
6.	Abbreviated Forms	BRB (be right back)	12
7.	Abbreviated Forms	GTG (got to go)	8
8.	Abbreviated Forms	ROFL (rolling on the floor laughing)	6
9.	Abbreviated Forms	LMAO (laughing my ass off)	5
10.	Abbreviated Forms	TMI (too much information)	4
11.	Abbreviated Forms	FOMO (fear of missing out)	20
12.	Abbreviated Forms	IMO (in my opinion)	18
13.	Abbreviated Forms	ICYMI (in case you missed it)	3

14.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	u (you)	50
15.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	r (are)	30
16.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	b4 (before)	20
17.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	2day (today)	15
18.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	gr8 (great)	12
19.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	luv (love)	10
20.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	cuz (because)	8
21.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	tho (though)	6
22.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	nite (night)	5
23.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	gud (good)	4
24.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	dat (that)	3
25.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	wut (what)	2
26.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	dis (this)	2
27.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	skul (school)	1
28.	Phonetic Spellings/Respellings	Fam(family)	1
29.	Colloquialisms/Slang	ghosted (suddenly stopped communicating)	25
30.	Colloquialisms/Slang	slay (perform impressively or look stylish)	20
31.	Colloquialisms/Slang	cap/no cap (lie/truth)	15
32.	Colloquialisms/Slang	rizz (charisma or romantic appeal)	12
33.	Colloquialisms/Slang	vibe (emotional atmosphere)	18
34.	Colloquialisms/Slang	lit (exciting or excellent)	10
35.	Colloquialisms/Slang	flex (show off)	8
36.	Colloquialisms/Slang	sus (suspicious)	6
37.	Colloquialisms/Slang	clapback (retort)	5
38.	Colloquialisms/Slang	savage (bold or disrespectfully honest)	12
39.	Colloquialisms/Slang	yeet (to throw energetically)	4
40.	Colloquialisms/Slang	nerve (to be annoyed)	3
41.	Colloquialisms/Slang	snatched (stylish or perfect appearance)	8
42.	Colloquialisms/Slang	drip (fashionable appearance)	6
43.	Colloquialisms/Slang	ship (to support a romantic relationship)	5
44.	Colloquialisms/Slang	stan (devoted fan)	4
45.	Colloquialisms/Slang	Sick-cool (something really nice)	2
46.	Colloquialisms/Slang	simp (someone who does too much for someone they like)	3
47.	Colloquialisms/Slang	adulthood (managing responsibilities of adulthood)	6
48.	Colloquialisms /Slang	Deadass (no longer trendy)	1
49.	Semantic Shifts	low-key (secretly or subtly)	20
50.	Semantic Shifts	high-key (openly or obviously)	10
	Semantic Shifts	tea (gossip)	8
51.	Semantic Shifts	turnt (exciting or wild)	6

52.	Semantic Shifts	salty (bitter or upset)	5
53.	Semantic Shifts	extra (over the top or excessive)	12
54.	Blended/Hybrid Forms	hangry (hungry + angry)	15
	Total		645

In terms of frequency, from the analysis, 6.45 % of the corpus contained neologisms. We also identified 55 different types of neologisms used by the students. Importantly, these insertions were not limited to creative expression but often replaced conventional academic formulations, leading to semantic distortion and register incongruity. For example, instead of writing “The dress is outdated,” a student wrote, “*That dress is deadass,*” invoking a slang term used to stress something that is no longer in vogue.

Contextual Misplacement and Register Mismatch

The predominant issue was not simply the presence of neologisms but their register mismatch using informal, non-academic language in formal academic writing. The following samples illustrate the nature and impact of these intrusions:

“The politician was *low-key* trying to *vibe* with the youth.”

Analysis: “Low-key” and “vibe” reflect subjective, informal evaluation, unsuitable in academic contexts.

Revised: “The politician made subtle efforts to connect with the youth demographic.”

“Her arguments were *savage*; she totally *clapped back* at the critics.”

Analysis: “Savage” and “clapped back” belong to social media repartee, inappropriate in academic writing.

Revised: “Her rebuttal was forceful and effectively addressed her critics’ concerns.”

“The government *ghosted* the issue after the protest.”

Analysis: “*Ghosted*” misrepresents formal state inaction using colloquial dating lexicon.

Revised: “The government disengaged from addressing the issue following the protests.”

“The new policy was giving dictatorship *vibes*.”

Analysis: Vague, metaphorical and informal.

Revised: “The new policy exhibited authoritarian characteristics.”

“He was *simping* for attention in the media.”

Analysis: “Simping” trivializes behavioural analysis, replacing analytical observation with slang.

Revised: “He appeared excessively eager to gain public approval.”

These examples underscore students’ struggle to transition from informal registers typical of social media to the formal register expected in academic writing. Rather than recognizing the functional boundaries between discourse domains, many students demonstrate an overextension of informal lexicon into academic expression.

Sample Usage and Register Evaluation

Below are selected examples of student sentences showing neologism usage, followed by their evaluation according to register appropriateness.

“The young woman really *slayed* in the wedding reception.”

Register Problem: “Slayed” is slang for impressive but inappropriate in formal writing.

Formal Alternative: “The young woman dressed exceptionally well in the wedding.”

“I was so *hangry* I couldn’t even think straight during the exam.”

Register Problem: “Hangry” (hungry + angry) trivializes tone.

Formal Alternative: “I was extremely hungry, which affected my concentration during the exam.”

“She *low-key* wanted to drop out, but didn’t say it.”

Register Problem: “Low-key” is a colloquial intensifier.

Formal Alternative: “She subtly expressed a desire to withdraw from the program.”

“They *ghosted* the whole class after the first test.”

Register Problem: “Ghosted” (disappeared without explanation) is informal and culturally contextual.

Formal Alternative: “They discontinued attending classes without providing any explanation.”

“The teacher’s outfit was *dripping* with style.”

Register Problem: “Dripping” used to mean stylish is non-standard.

Formal Alternative: “The teacher was dressed in a very fashionable manner.”

The cumulative presence of such language across writings led to register clashes, undermining the overall formal tone required in academic writing.

Linguistic Domains Affected

To assess the impact of neologism usage, each writing was evaluated across five linguistic domains: grammar/syntax, spelling, vocabulary choice, coherence, and register appropriateness. The rubric employed a 5-point scale, where 1 = very poor and 5 = excellent. The following aggregated results emerged:

Table 2. Linguistic domains affected by Neologisms

Linguistic Domain	%
Vocabulary Appropriateness	78%
Register Control	76%
Grammar and Syntax	64%
Spelling and Mechanics	61%
Coherence and Clarity	52%

Vocabulary and register were most adversely impacted. Lexical choices reflected frequent informal substitutions (e.g., “She was shook” for “She was deeply shocked”) and lexical innovations that either lacked semantic clarity or introduced ambiguity (e.g., “It was a whole mood”). Moreover, syntax was occasionally distorted, as in: “They was not ready for the drip,”

an informal and grammatically flawed sentence used to describe unpreparedness and style perception. In spelling, phonetic simplification and digital shorthand (e.g., b4, u, gud, cuz) appeared frequently, suggesting that orthographic habits from social media had permeated academic writing norms. Such patterns undermine linguistic accuracy and may habituate learners to deviant forms.

Correlation with Social Media Usage Patterns

The survey conducted as part of this study provided valuable insights into students' use of social media language and their metalinguistic awareness regarding its impact on academic writing thereby affecting linguistic competence. The analysis of the questionnaire reveals that social media has a significant influence on students' language choices, particularly in academic writing. The frequent use of informal language on social media platforms, combined with a lack of awareness and differentiation between formal and informal language, may contribute to the erosion of formal language skills in academic writing. The responses to the survey questions revealed a distinct pattern of social media language usage among first- and second-year university students.

Social Media Usage and Frequency

The students reported frequent use of social media, with 90% using it daily. The most popular platforms were WhatsApp (100%), Facebook (80%), Tiktok (60%) and Instagram (30%). This frequent usage suggests that social media plays a significant role in their daily lives and may influence their language choices. Findings reveal that WhatsApp is the platform with the highest number of users. Given that 90% use social media daily, it is obvious that this frequent interaction augments their chances of using social media induced neologisms.

Language Usage on Social Media

The students' language usage on social media was characterized by the use of informal language, including slang (60%), abbreviations (50%), and acronyms (40%). The most commonly used terms were LOL (Laughing Out Loud), BRB (Be Right Back), FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), and DM (Direct Message).

Metalinguistic Awareness

Half of the students (50%) reported struggling to differentiate between formal and informal language, and 60% believed that social media has affected their ability to use formal language in academic writing. This lack of awareness and differentiation may lead to the use of informal language in academic contexts, which can negatively impact the quality of their writing.

Perceived Impact on Academic Writing

The majority of students (70%) believed that social media influences their academic writing, particularly in terms of grammar (60%), vocabulary (50%), coherence/flow (40%), clarity of ideas (50%), and tone/formality (60%). This suggests that social media may be contributing to the erosion of formal language skills in academic writing. The students' responses suggest that social media neologisms have a significant impact on their language choices, particularly in academic writing. While some students believed that social media language should never be used in formal academic contexts (40%), others thought it could be used in specific cases (30%) or freely (30%). Survey data indicated that the majority of participants (90%) reported using social media daily, with platforms like WhatsApp, TikTok and Facebook being the most frequently accessed. Notably: (1) High-frequency users (4+ hrs/day) scored lower across all

domains; (2) Students who primarily communicated in digital spaces using informal or trending expressions exhibited higher instances of register violations.

This suggests that exposure intensity and linguistic environment in digital media play a crucial role in shaping students' written language behaviours. Unlike face-to-face interactions, social media fosters asynchronous and performative language use, which may prioritize brevity, creativity, and social signalling over structural integrity and semantic precision. A significant portion (50%) acknowledged using acronyms, abbreviations, and slang in their posts. When asked about their language choices in academic writing, 30% of the students admitted to occasionally using social media language, although they often recognized that such language was not appropriate for formal contexts. These students cited reasons such as comfort, relatability, and the casual tone of social media communication as motivations for their use of slang in academic assignments.

Further analysis of the survey revealed that 40% of students were unaware of the negative impact that such informal language might have on their writing proficiency, particularly regarding grammar, vocabulary, and formal tone. Notably, 60 % of students expressed the belief that using social media language in academic writing would negatively affect their grades, indicating some awareness of its consequences in formal educational contexts. Their prevalence and misuse signal an alarming blurring of linguistic registers among young adult learners. The findings suggest that, while students exhibit a high degree of lexical creativity and are clearly familiar to the evolving nature of digital discourse, they often lack the metalinguistic awareness required to differentiate between informal and formal registers. These findings highlight the students' mixed perceptions of social media language in academia, suggesting a gap in their understanding of register variation and its influence on academic writing proficiency.

Register Theory and the Breakdown in Register Control

From the perspective of Halliday's Language Register Theory, linguistic competence requires the ability to navigate varying registers across communicative contexts. A student should be capable of modulating language depending on field (subject matter), tenor (audience relationship), and mode (spoken/written, formal/informal). The prevalence of neologisms in formal academic contexts reveals a significant register control deficiency among students. This deficiency manifests in two primary ways:

Register Flattening: Students display a one-register-fits-all approach, failing to shift from informal to formal registers.

Register Leakage: Social media register, characterized by brevity, expressiveness, and novelty, intrudes upon formal academic discourse, leading to inappropriate tone and reduced clarity.

Such phenomena point not only to linguistic carelessness but also to deeper pedagogical challenges in teaching register differentiation. The student's linguistic repertoire becomes skewed toward informal dominance, with diminished ability to access or activate the formal academic register. The findings provide strong evidence that excessive social media neologism use correlates with diminished academic language proficiency. According to Halliday's Language Register Theory, language competence involves an awareness of context-appropriate variations. The inability of students to transition from informal to formal registers in writing suggests a breakdown in register control a critical component of academic literacy. The use of neologisms not only affected vocabulary quality but also led to syntactic simplifications and coherence issues, demonstrating broader linguistic regression.

Implications of the Results

The implications are manifold and affect students, educators, curriculum developers, and policy-makers:

Curriculum Development: There is a need to integrate explicit instruction on register awareness, formal writing skills, and digital language boundaries in university language programs.

Rethinking Neologisms in Pedagogical Terms: Educators must become more vigilant in identifying and correcting neologism usage in academic contexts, employing targeted interventions for frequent offenders. While the creative and expressive potential of neologisms cannot be dismissed especially as markers of evolving language communities the unfiltered migration of these terms into formal academic spaces necessitates critical intervention. Unlike sociolinguistic environments that celebrate linguistic change as cultural vibrancy, the academic space demands clarity, formality, and universality. Educators must resist the temptation to normalize digital speech patterns in academic writing, lest they facilitate the erosion of academic discourse standards. The challenge, then, is not to suppress linguistic innovation but to cultivate contextual awareness and functional discipline. Students must be trained not only in what language to use, but when and why.

Digital Literacy Education: Teaching students not only how to use digital platforms but also how to navigate linguistic choices responsibly can mitigate long-term impacts. Assessment Reform: Rubrics for academic writing should include criteria for register appropriateness to reinforce the distinction between casual and formal expression.

Policy Recommendation: Universities should promote workshops and campaigns on “Digital Language Discipline” to raise awareness among students about the long-term effects of social media language habits on their academic and professional future. The results have far-reaching implications for both language proficiency and academic performance, as students who lack control over register cannot fully engage in the discursive practices required for success in higher education.

Conclusion

The frequent incorporation of neologisms and abbreviations compromises the clarity, coherence, and tone of students’ written work, affecting their overall academic performance. This study has investigated the impact of neologisms particularly those emerging from social media on the linguistic proficiency of university students. Through a rigorous analysis of 200 written academic texts produced by first- and second-year students in Cameroonian universities, we observed an overwhelming infiltration of informal, digitally derived neologisms into formal academic writing. These linguistic intrusions are indicative of a broader destruction in core linguistic competencies: lexical appropriateness, grammatical accuracy, orthographic control, coherence, and stylistic consistency. Using Halliday’s Register Theory as an analytical framework, we demonstrated how the social media register, driven by immediacy, performativity, and expressive novelty, infiltrates students’ academic outputs. Students appear unable to shift effectively between the digital and academic linguistic domains, leading to what we have termed “register flattening” a condition in which a single, informal register dominates all forms of written communication. This study underscores the significant impact of social media neologisms on university students’ academic writing proficiency. The research indicates that while students are aware of the importance of using formal language in academic settings, many struggle to separate the informal language of social media from their

academic writing. However, it is important to recognize that neologisms and the informal language of social media also play an important role in the evolution of language, reflecting shifts in cultural and linguistic norms. While the use of these neologisms may have negative implications for formal academic writing, they are an essential part of language variation and adaptation. Moving forward, it is crucial for educational institutions to adopt strategies that help students navigate between these varying linguistic registers. Incorporating lessons on register awareness, promoting writing practices that emphasize clarity and formality, and helping students understand when and where to use social media language appropriately are steps in the right direction. While the linguistic innovations of social media should not be disregarded, their appropriate use within academic contexts remains critical to maintaining academic writing standards.

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