# NEOLOGISMS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH: STRUCTURAL, SEMANTIC AND FUNCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

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**Abstract**

Neologisms are the most direct evidence of a language adapting to social change. Drawing on social media, online newspapers, and digital communication as primary data sources, this thesis examines the structural, semantic, and functional characteristics of neologisms in contemporary English. At the structural level, the study finds that abbreviation and compounding are the most productive mechanisms of neologism formation, together accounting for nearly sixty percent of internet English vocabulary—significantly higher than in standard English. Blends such as "choppelganger" and "floordrobe" emerge as the most recognizable type of contemporary neologism due to their expressiveness and transmissibility. At the semantic level, semantic shift (old words acquiring new meanings) and metaphorical extension remain the core pathways of neologism meaning-making; the semantic trajectories of words such as "slop," "touch grass," and "performative" map collective anxieties about AI proliferation, digital addiction, and identity performance. At the functional level, neologisms serve three core functions: efficiency (compressing information), identity (marking community belonging), and evaluation (expressing stance). The tension between the lag in dictionary inclusion—typically requiring several years of observation—and the immediacy of social media diffusion constitutes the primary challenge in managing the lifecycle of contemporary neologisms.

**Keywords:** neologisms, word formation, semantic shift, social media, lexicography, language functions

Introduction

English has never stopped creating new words. But the speed of generation, pathways of diffusion, and degree of social visibility of contemporary English neologisms differ qualitatively from any previous period. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) adds hundreds of new entries and senses with each quarterly update; its March 2026 update alone included over 500 new words, phrases, and senses. Merriam-Webster added 5,000 words in the 12th edition of its dictionary in 2025, followed by another 1,400 in September 2026. Behind these numbers lies a corpus ecology—constituted by social media, online news, and digital communication—that is incubating, filtering, and diffusing neologisms with unprecedented efficiency.

This thesis systematically examines the characteristics of contemporary English neologisms across three dimensions: structure, semantics, and function. Data sources include official dictionary update announcements (OED, Merriam-Webster), mainstream media coverage of internet slang (The New York Times, BBC), and quantitative data from linguistic research. The research questions are: Which word-



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formation mechanisms are most active in digital contexts? What patterns govern the semantic generation of neologisms? What functions do neologisms serve in communication?

Structural Characteristics: The Productivity Landscape of Word Formation

The Most Productive Mechanisms: Abbreviation and Compounding

Quantitative data reveal significant differences in word-formation preferences between internet English and standard English. A study based on a neologism database comparing morphological processes with frequency of use found that in standard English, the most common processes are, in order, new roots (24.46%), affixation (20.49%), and abbreviation (17.33%). In internet English, by contrast, abbreviation (30.06%) and compounding (29.27%) together account for 59.33%—nearly double the corresponding proportion in standard English (33.06%). This indicates a systematic preference in digital environments for the two operations of "shortening" and "combining."

This preference has clear communicative motivations. Digital communication is subject to multiple constraints—character limits, input costs, and reading speed—and abbreviated forms can carry maximum information in minimal form. "Floordrobe" (floor + wardrobe, referring to clothes piled on the floor), included in the OED's June 2026 update, is simultaneously a compound and a humorous visual metaphor, its word-formation logic entirely serving the sharing needs of social media. "Life hack," which first appeared in use only in 2004, has completed a typical digital-age neologism's path to institutionalization through formal OED inclusion.

Blends: The "Signature Product" of Contemporary Neologisms

Blends (portmanteaus) are not the most productive in number, but they are the most prominent in transmissibility and recognizability. "Choppelganger," which spread rapidly among Gen Z and Gen Alpha in early 2026, is a typical specimen: it blends "chopped" (slang for ugly or unpopular) with "doppelgänger" (a double or look-alike), defined as "a version of you that is uglier than you." The New York Times reported that the word traveled from TikTok videos to middle school classrooms to everyday conversation in a matter of months. "Folklorico" (folk dance) and "folksonomy" (folk + taxonomy), both included in the OED, similarly demonstrate the productivity of blends in specific domains.

The advantage of blends lies in the balance between semantic transparency and formal novelty: users can understand the meaning without learning an entirely new root, while the formal "mashup" itself constitutes a stylistic signal marking the

The Continued Vitality of Affixation and Conversion

Affixation accounts for 30.06% of internet English, the highest among all mechanisms. This data corrects the stereotype that "internet English only excels at abbreviation." In fact, derivational affixes play a systematic role in neologism formation: the "-y" suffix continues English's classic path of adjectivalization in words like "blingy" (flashy, luxurious) and "fiending" (craving intensely); AI-related neologisms such as "algorithmic bias" and "prompt engineering" demonstrate the productivity of "adjective + noun" and "noun + gerund" compound patterns in technical discourse.

Conversion is particularly prominent in digital contexts. Noun-to-verb conversion is one of English's oldest word-formation strategies, but it has gained new vitality on social media: "Rickroll" has shifted from a proper noun to a verb meaning "to trick someone into clicking a link that leads to Rick Astley's song"; "vaguepost" has evolved from an adjective-noun combination into a verb meaning "to deliberately post ambiguous content on social media to elicit engagement." The zero-form nature of conversion perfectly suits digital communication's demand for concision.



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Semantic Characteristics: How Old Words Acquire New Meanings

Semantic Shift as a Major Source of Neologisms

Neologism formation depends not only on formal innovation but also on semantic innovation. OED and Merriam-Webster update data show that many "new words" are in fact new senses of existing vocabulary. The semantic trajectory of Merriam-Webster's 2025 Word of the Year, "slop," is highly representative: the word meant "soft mud" in the 18th century, "food refuse" (pig swill) in the 19th century, "garbage, worthless matter" in the 20th century, and was formally defined in 2025 as "low-quality digital content produced in bulk by artificial intelligence." From "mud" to "AI garbage," semantic shift has completed the naming of an entirely new technological phenomenon.

Similar cases include: "performative," which expanded from a philosophical pragmatics term (Austin's "performative utterance") to a general critique of "showy expression" on social media; "touch grass," which shifted from a literal action to an injunction against being "out of touch, excessively online," evolving from an insult to a goal of self-imposed "digital detox"; and "ecosystem" and "guardrail," which acquired new senses of "platform ecosystem" and "safety guardrail" in digital contexts.

The Social-Cognitive Function of Metaphorical Extension

The semantic generation of neologisms relies heavily on metaphor. The metaphorical basis of "slop" is the sensory association of "wet, soft, sticky, unpleasant texture," which enables it to convey disgust and dismissal of AI-generated content more expressively than words like "garbage" or "trash." The metaphor of "uncanny valley" projects the spatial image of a "valley" onto the psychological discomfort humans feel toward nearly lifelike artificial creations; the term's migration from a specialized robotics term into popular discourse reflects widespread anxiety accompanying the increasing prevalence of AI-generated images and virtual personas.

"Gen Z stare" demonstrates another type of semantic construction: it is not a metaphor but a naming of an observable behavior. A previously unnamed social phenomenon—the "blank stare" of Gen Z when anticipating a verbal response—was given a name and quickly became a social category that could be discussed, critiqued, and self-identified with. The power of naming lies in its solidification of diffuse behavior into a recognizable type.

Directionality of Semantic Shift: From Technology to Everyday Life and Back

Semantic shift in contemporary English neologisms flows in both directions. On one hand, technical terms continue to "sink" into everyday discourse: "parasocial" has shifted from a communication studies term to everyday language describing fans' one-sided emotional investment in influencers; "compute" has acquired a noun sense from its verb meaning "to calculate," referring to "the computational resources required to run a computer program." On the other hand, everyday vocabulary is being "uploaded" into technical contexts: "vibe coding" embeds the everyday word "vibe" into the naming of AI-assisted programming, precisely capturing the practice of "letting AI write code by feel without scrutinizing the principles."

Functional Characteristics: What Neologisms Do in Communication

Efficiency Function: Compression and Rapid Recognition

The functional core of abbreviations and acronyms is information compression. The OED's September 2026 update formally included "auto-reply" as a dictionary entry; the word evolved from an email function name into a general expression describing any "automated response" behavior. Merriam-



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Webster's addition of "AGI" (Artificial General Intelligence) continues the tradition of acronyms in technical fields, functioning to rapidly activate a complex concept in professional communication.

The efficiency function is particularly critical in social media conversations. Acronyms such as "TL;DR" (too long; didn't read) and "ICYMI" (in case you missed it) are essentially metacommentary markers: they do not convey content but evaluate or guide the content itself. This function is irreplaceable on character-limited platforms.

Identity Function: Marking Community Belonging

One of the core functions of neologisms is serving as "social badges." Users of "choppelganger" signal their membership in a digital culture that understands the meaning of "chopped." "Fiending," which entered the OED from street slang, carries a specific cultural stance and generational marker through its very use. "Looksmaxxing," which spread from incel subculture terminology to mainstream dictionaries, carries a controversial semantic charge ("sometimes extreme or dangerous appearance-enhancement behaviors") that forces users to take an implicit stance on their own position when adopting the term.

The linguistic basis of this function is "indexicality": neologisms not only convey propositional meaning but also point to the user's social identity, generational belonging, and cultural taste. A dictionary's inclusion of a subcultural term is, in essence, social recognition of its user community.

Evaluation Function: Expressing Stance and Position

The essence of many contemporary neologisms is as evaluative tools. "Slop" is not a neutral description of AI-generated content but a judgment carrying explicit negative evaluation. "Copium" compares the behavior of "denying and minimizing adverse outcomes" to a kind of mental anesthetic; its use is itself a mockery of others' self-deception. "Performative" in social media contexts has become almost entirely functionalized as a critique label, meaning "done for display rather than out of sincerity."

Evaluative neologisms often carry strong pragmatic coloring whose meaning cannot be fully conveyed through dictionary definitions. The dictionary definition of "touch grass" is "to engage in normal activities in the real world," but its pragmatic force lies in the contempt implied in the imperative tone—"you have become so detached from reality that you need to be reminded to touch grass."

Lexicographic Responses and the Lifecycle of Neologisms

Inclusion Criteria and the Challenge of Timeliness

Dictionary editors apply established criteria when deciding whether a new word merits inclusion. Merriam-Webster identifies three: frequent use, widespread use, and meaningful use. The Cambridge Dictionary tracks terms in a "watch list" database, requiring evidence of sustained currency before adding entries. OED editors state that inclusion requires "widespread evidence from multiple independent sources, with use continuing or growing over several years."

These criteria create an inherent tension with the speed of digital lexical innovation. Terms can achieve viral status within days, yet lexicographers must wait to see whether they persist. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that rapid inclusion is possible when warranted—the Cambridge Dictionary added "COVID-19" just 37 days after the disease was identified. Whether AI-related and social media terminology will receive similar treatment on a large scale remains an open question.

The Fate of Neologisms: Why Some Words Stick



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Lexical innovation is not enough for a word to survive. It must diffuse through a speech community and become "enregistered"—recognized as a meaningful social resource. Several factors influence this process.

Indexicality. New words carry social meanings that point to identity, stance, or group membership. A term may index youth, irony, subcultural belonging, or technological savvy. Its survival may depend on its ability to acquire new indexical associations without losing coherence.

Metalinguistic Discussion. The process of enregisterment is accompanied by explicit talk about the term—users defining it, debating its appropriateness, and evaluating its coolness. This discussion is not noise; it is evidence that a term is becoming socially recognizable.

Institutionalization. For a word to become fully established, it must achieve some degree of institutional recognition. Dictionary inclusion is one marker, though lexicographers are cautious, watching terms for years to see if they are passing fads or permanent additions.

The teacher's observation about "choppelganger"—"in a week or two, students will move on to the next mysterious slang word"—may be the most honest description of the fate of most internet neologisms. The ones that truly enter the language system are those that are not only widely used but also repeatedly talked about. Dictionary inclusion is less the endpoint of a neologism than the moment of confirmation that it has shifted from "fad" to "language resource."

Conclusion

The structural, semantic, and functional characteristics of contemporary English neologisms jointly point to a core judgment: the digital communication environment has not invented new linguistic rules but has significantly altered the relative weight and combinatory patterns of existing rules. The dominance of abbreviation and compounding reflects the efficiency pressures of digital communication; the prominence of blends embodies online culture's preference for "witty forms"; and the vitality of semantic shift demonstrates that, when confronted with entirely new phenomena such as AI, social media, and digital identity, the English-speaking community prefers to say new things with old words rather than creating from scratch.

The tension between the lag in dictionary inclusion and the immediacy of social media diffusion is a structural feature of the contemporary neologism ecology. This tension is unlikely to be resolved; it is inherent in the different temporalities of linguistic innovation and institutional documentation. What matters is that the process continues—that English speakers keep creating new words, that dictionaries keep tracking them, and that the language remains responsive to the changing communicative needs of its users. The lexicon will always be expanding, and we are all—every time we coin a phrase, share a meme, or adopt a new term—participants in its evolution.

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