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## "So, Literally,...Basically,...it's like...": A Study into the Generational and Sociological Impact of American Language Culture

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Capstone  
Professor Michelle Figueroa

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**“So, Literally,...Basically,...it’s like...”: A Study into the  
Generational and Sociological Impact of American Language Culture**

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## Abstract

Language is unique to the human species. It serves to communicate thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. Within the context of this capstone I outline the theory that language is much more than this. Words can also serve to bond or reject, based on the level of acceptance within social groups towards the speaker. In seeking to discover what effects specific language utterances have on social interaction and the processes involved in developing cohesiveness collective identity in these groups, I found that they do have a definite impact and this is based mainly within generational parameters. Using a mixed method approach of surveys, field work and a first person, participant-observer approach, I found words are used to connect and establish bonds and acceptance in social groups. The impact is that this affects all areas of social interaction and helps explain how and why groups form and/or reject those who do not conform. Also discovered was that younger people place more of an emphasis on words than older people do. This may be due to an added peer pressure to conform to the crowd. I also found that words are flexible and fluid. They tend to adopt and evolve as their intended meanings change and adapt with the times. I also discovered that there is a misconception within certain generations that people who overuse slang and age-specific jargon are less intelligent. This helps to explain generational attitudes and behaviors. Finally, this research is limited in scope and should be further explored to obtain a fuller, more accurate analysis.

*Keywords:* cross talk, interactional sociolinguistics, generational ties

## Introduction

In this capstone project, I explored how specific word utterances (slang, jargon, colloquial, informal language) affected interaction and formed social cohesiveness/collectiveness in groups. This formation of language evolution, in turn, forms the development of collective identity in American culture. This research project has been of interest to me since February 2019, while completing an observation assignment for SBS 362: Qualitative Research Methods. Noticing the prevalence of young college students to use certain buzzwords (“basically, like, literally” and “actually”) during their normal social interactions, I began to mentally document the situational circumstances and social makeup of these conversations. This exercise resulted in my decision to study this social phenomenon in-depth, and has become my Capstone research project.

Addressing five main thematic areas: evolution and the meaning of words; grammaticalization of word usage; mainstream attitude/perception of young people who engage in identity language; words as inclusive or exclusive social markers; and cultural/ethno-connection of word connotations—I focused on researching the ongoing phenomenon of language and how it is molded, adopted, claimed and used by different age groups to represent a particular spatial and temporal shift in generational identity. I did this by addressing two main branches of language and linguistics. Primarily, I studied sociolinguistics, which is day-to-day language interactions (the praxis) of communicating meanings, utterances, and pauses. The second branch is at the macro level, the sociology of language; how does language connect us as a species and how is it culturally unique? I studied word usage among college students aged 18-25 at California State University,

Monterey Bay (CSUMB), and Hartnell Community College. The distribution of a Qualtrics survey via social media, for a broader social connection of words, served to enhance the representative scope of my research.

I also introduce my own first person, primary source knowledge of this matter. The significance in this approach is the manner in which it injects real life experience as empirical data to be considered within the context of this research paper. This auto-ethnographical account relies on a narrative that lends authority and authenticity to the overall argumentation of my presentation. The etymological lingo of the jail environment is so intermeshed with its political and social structure that to defy this matrix is to risk ostracism, physical injury, or even death. In this forced and involuntary social circle, *words really do matter*. The importance of this study helps sociologists understand how this social occurrence impacts family, relationships, social groups, the workplace, and even politics. In forming the basis of my research interest; what effects do specific language utterances have on social interaction and what are the processes involved in developing cohesiveness collective identity in these groups, a fascinating social phenomenon began to emerge: generational words enhance generational ties. Finally, I address how the acceptance of language as a prerequisite is not exclusive to the young and, in fact, can be found in many intergenerational social communities.

## **Literature Review**

The literature for this capstone connects theory of meaning, related theories, interactional sociolinguistics/cross talk and evolutionary phenomenon to establish the foundations of examination into this research topic. Scholars of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language refer to the process that describes how grammatical systems advance geographically and generationally, explaining this structure process as grammaticalization. Several studies addressed the mainstream perception of youth who use the common jargon/slang covered in this capstone and connected the use and overuse of certain words to their intelligence as well as suggesting a collective identity linkage. Interactional sociolinguistics is a framework of linguistic anthropology, which combines linguistics with the culture of anthropology so as to understand how the use of language informs, enhances, and creates social spaces and cultural interaction. As themes emerge and collective identity begins to enjoy more prominence in the language component of this capstone, the individual words themselves form a basis for inclusivity and exclusivity. This becomes very nearly tribalistic in practice as buzzwords determine acceptance or rejection. This phenomenon of tribalism is reported on in a participant-observer aspect of my capstone. I use my own prison experiences as a basis for literary license and as an auto ethnographic analysis review.

## **Evolution and the Meaning of Words**

Extensive literature has been devoted to the study of semantic communication. Specific research into theories of words and meanings conclude that words have powerful meanings and transcend the mere meaning of the word itself. They establish community and belonging. (Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang, 1990; Romaine & Lange, 1991) and (Tagliamonte & D'Arcy, 2004) all agree that, even though words evolve over time to take on new meanings and nuances from that which was originally constructed, societal construct surrounding words remains solid: they build and strengthen solidarity among groups. This is further discussed and studied as interactional sociolinguistics, "...meaning is not simply produced by a speaker and interpreted by a hearer. Meaning is negotiated in context." (Fetzer, 2011, pg. 256). According to Fetzer, communication is a back and forth collaborative endeavor. The participants' goals are to convey, in context, information about the nature of their intergenerational relationship and social status and about their degree of commitment; in short, the extent to which the speaker belongs to the group he is addressing.

Theory of meaning is shaped by what is understood by the hearers (of a word) vs. what is intended by the utterers of that word. (Romaine & Lange, 1991; Tagliamonte & D'Arcy, 2004; Fetzer, 2011) and (Underhill, 1988) all state that our understanding of words are based on how these words came to mean this. (Ogbu, 1999) emphasized the power of a shared language in his article on Ebonics and collective identity within the African American community. He stresses that a shared mnemonic capacity within that particular language identity creates ties and reinforces a sense of belonging and this sense of togetherness can also be integrated into similar communities (youth culture, for instance). (Blyth, Jr., Recktenwald & Wang 1990), and (Romaine & Lange, 1991) argue

that the intended meaning of the word “like” as an internal thought process and/or reported action verb helps fortify this word solidarity.

### **Grammaticalization of Word Usage and the Youth Culture Connection**

Grammaticalization (of words) is a process related to word evolution, yet with subtle differences. This theme has perhaps the most studies attached to it. (Hay, Drager & Warren, 2010; Kreuz & Roberts, 1994; Romaine & Lange, 1991; Shlowiy, 2014; Tagliamonte & D’Arcy, 2004). This is neither a theory of language nor of language change; its goal is to describe how grammatical forms arise and develop spatially and temporally and it explains why they are structured the way they are. (Su, 2016) presented an interesting case analysis in her observances and field notes while attending a conference featuring Warren Buffet and Bill Gates, two of the wealthiest men on the planet. She noted that speakers have a tendency to use and reuse words, thereby shaping the emergence of grammaticalization. This repetitiveness among participants are constantly modifying prior utterances and molding words through grammatical structures of a language, achieving the interactive goals of socialization.

Within the parameters of this definition, I focus on word usage and the structured ways in which certain key words have come to be represented and recognized by other familiar words. The words my research has discovered fitting this criteria is the use of “like” used in place of internal thoughts, approximate units of measurement, quotatives, and/or the introduction of new material into conversation (Underhill 1998; Tagliamonte & D’Arcy 2004; Blyth, Jr., Recktenwald & Wang 1990; Romaine & Lange, 1991). (Eckert, 2003) points out the connection between grammaticalization and the growth of youth into

adult status through ownership of words, while (Barbieri, 2008) proposes that patterns exist which differentiate the speaker's politics, stances and emotional involvement, all the while admitting not enough research has been done exploring the language variation during the course of one's life span. This begins to demonstrate how the study of word usage within the youth culture helps transition their maturation process. In the context of this paper, "like" just happens to be the grammatical vehicle youth are using as they lay claim and establish their own niche through ownership of words.

### **Mainstream Attitude/Perception of Young People Who Engage in Identity Language**

In using and overusing any phrase, idiom or slang term (such as "like"), there is a prevailing school of thought and stereotyping that one's intelligence is directly associated with the use (and in this case, overuse) of slang versus proper, i.e. standard, English grammar. (Blyth, Jr., Recktenwald, & Wang, 1990; Ogbu, 1999); and (Su, 2006) argue that there is a stigmatic effect associated with youth who use/overuse the "like" narrative in everyday discourse. However, (Ogbu, 1999) draws a distinct cultural difference with this generally unaccepted use of language, per se, and sees it as an agent of inclusion, cohesiveness, and socializing among youth, in general, and the Ebonics type, in particular, of identity language emerging from the African-American community to retain their heritage through language. "They strongly hold onto it because it has always been a part of their collective identity-what gives them a sense of who they are and where they belong" (Ogbu, 1999, pg. 173).

This brings yet another angle on the theme of perception attitudes and young people's language: that of collective identity. An emerging phenomenon solidifying the

claim of “identity language” is researched in the ubiquitous use of abbreviated language in texting (Calhoun, 2015); Shlowiy, 2014). This observation is supported by (Odango, 2015) as he focuses on perspectives on language shift and linguistic youth identities. Following these perspectives is one gained in research by (Bucholtz, 2005) who argues that identity is the product rather than the source of linguistic practices and therefore is social and cultural rather than a psychological constraint. While not specifically mentioning youth in her study, Bucholtz's, findings nonetheless would apply to the culture of youth as with any other group. These separate, but similar articles seem to point to the emerging shifts and permutations society is seeing in the building of identity in youth through the use of language. One final study cements the culture of language as youth identity investigating slang within the college scene. (Hummon, 1994), examines how the college environ characterizes fellow students through the use of slang. Concluding that these students are incorporating specific college slang with generally recognized slang, a picture begins to emerge in which more emphasis is placed on college terms and phrases, while simultaneously retaining the connection to the social world of general slang. In other words, while straddling both worlds, the youth identity begins to assert itself apart from society at large.

### **Words as Inclusive or Exclusive Social Factors**

A pattern unfolds as the sociological components of language interact with word users, with youth culture and collective identity, with specific identity and maturity formation, finally coming back full circle to the beginning as this process hinges on the theory of meaning. I began this review by making note of the frequent use of the words “like” and “literally”. What ultimately emerged was a complex and interconnected web of

semantics, theory of word meaning, stereotype perceptions, collective identity, and sociological agency in the usage of these words. The importance of slang in the formation of college social cliques and factions is argued by (Hummon, 1994) as more than just utterances to represent thoughts or concepts. The power and agency in slang may be used to describe: an evolutionary shift in belonging; an establishment of cultural identity; or act as an agent of cohesion, recognition, belonging and inclusion among various social groups.

However, according to the author, more often than not, these identities stigmatize students who fall outside the sphere of student expectations. Further research needs to be done in this area and I anticipate that the results of this paper will yield definite answers on this topic. This promises to be an interesting and enlightening undertaking and the outcomes will certainly affect how words are perceived. The importance of words on group cohesion can infiltrate itself into all facets of the social fabric. Within this context, interactional sociolinguistics is focused on the social meaning of these words in real-time usage. Under what scenarios and by which speakers are these resources being employed, and to what effect? (Fetzer, 2011; Leblanc, 2019). I also show how this love/hate relationship with words and language is not just exclusive to the younger generations.

Exploring diversity, the role of language, and group attraction in team cohesiveness, it is determined to be influenced by gender and ethnicity as well as just language usage (Roberson Quinetta M., 2008). This study supports my hypothesis as it describes how team building and team cohesiveness was directly influenced and strengthened by language in social groups. An interesting distinction is drawn in which the cohesive factor is separated into two related, yet dissimilar, schools of thought; task

cohesion and interpersonal cohesion. The first addresses the group commitment to task, the second to group attraction for fellow members. The main takeaway of this study is that language cohesiveness agrees with Hummon's study on the effect of slang on group unity.

This theme is further repeated and agreed with in a study as the researchers find individual prestige also directly influences cohesiveness and group participation, (Berger et al., 1972). Overall group power status is directly connected to the level of power and prestige found within the individual group members' characteristics, even if the activity at hand requires no discernible difference in social status, per se. The authors find that, in the case of status equality between subjects, this hierarchy rift is lessened. Once more, this finding is evidence that shared characteristics, such as language, becomes a binding agent within social groups.

### **Words Matter**

Another thematic area of particular interest is that of interactional sociolinguistics, pioneered by John Gumperz, a linguistic anthropologist who specialized in the field of ethno-language and introduced his theory of cross talk. Interactional sociolinguistics is the study of the way people convey and conceal meaning and social standing with their choice of words, their intonations, and their accents (Rampton, 2008). This is quite culture specific and has been credited with promoting miscommunication as a result of a failure to convey intended meanings across cultural chasms. As reported by researchers, these meanings form because of specific social relations, cultural histories and institutional

processes. This connection is produced and interpreted by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically. Linguistic skills that cannot cross the boundaries of race affirm race appropriate identifiers. (Rampton, 2008; Romo, 2011; Grubačić & O'Hearn, 2016 ). The significance of words; the conveyance of these messages; and the actors hearing and delivering these utterances, are further examined in this capstone. Researchers argue how language is filled with subtleties and is best understood and appreciated in the context and spatial arena of the culture being studied (Cardozo-Freeman, 1995; Grubačić & O'Hearn, 2016). Since survival is a top priority in the prisoner's world, words and word context not only fortify social connectivity, they embody a theoretical cornerstone of this paper: the foundational theory of meaning. The importance of cohesiveness and inclusivity is paramount in the prison environment. Group-speak fosters solidarity, mutual recognition, prestige, and a sense of exclusiveness. It also allows members to form and share a social identity.

The literature is clear on this issue: Not only the words, but the *manner* in which words are delivered, is paramount in establishing a social connection within a group's structural criterions. However, in researching this phenomenon, I also discovered cases in which exclusion produced an effect opposite to the "norm" i.e. reclusion, ostracism, etc. According to research "...studies provide the first direct evidence that exclusion can lead people to turn hopefully toward others as sources of renewed social connection." (Maner et al., 2007, pg. 52). Cross talk is in the frontline of determinants that fortifies and reinforces social ties while, simultaneously, filtering out actors who do not meet the requisites of any particular social genre. Successful acceptability and maneuvering of this

social structure is not taught, but rather a pseudo-instinctive trait. The literature defines this as “situated communication”

### **Theoretical Framework**

Presenting this research topic depends greatly on an understanding of words, and more importantly, word meanings. Theory of meaning is a frame of thought focused on the relationships between meanings and references to objects. Within this umbrella, semantics theory explains and clarifies informational meaning in everyday language, while foundational theory of meaning asks how, or by what standard, did these expressions come to have these meanings. In exploring the sociological influences that contribute to and affect word usage adaptation among youths, I turn to an overarching concept known as theory of meaning. Within this principle, there exist distinct and specific sub-theories explaining nuances in word and speech context, and the intended meanings associated with each. I found two to be most relevant to my research: semantics theory and the foundational theory of meaning. Semantics theory is a framework that seeks to explain and clarify informational meaning in everyday language, while foundational theory of meaning asks *how*, or by what standard, these expressions came to have these meanings. Finally, in researching these two theories, a third, associated variable was introduced; a semantic process known as grammaticalization — the process by which a word gradually—changes adverbs to words that intensify an utterance without changing the meaning in any way (Romaine & Lange, 1991).

During the literature reading on my research topic, recurring themes of semantics

and word meanings began to unfold, such as linguistic analyses of the use of “literally” as an intensifier. This definition of grammaticalization shows how a regular form of language changes and is one of several concurrent uses of the word. For example, Tagliamonte and D’Arcy argue how

...new forms replace old forms and old forms take on new functions. As new forms replace older ones or develop new meanings, all forms exist simultaneously in the grammar. However, new functions necessarily entail changes in grammatical categorization...despite ongoing shifts in function, grammaticalizing forms retain traces of their original referential meaning. This is referred to as persistence (2004, pg. 496).

Theories of semantics and their history in the English language help explain my goal in uncovering contributing insights. Social and linguistic motivations of language change and *especially*, the influence of youth culture on this phenomenon are my main concern and focus.

Semantic theory and the foundational theory of meaning also appear prominently in the work by (Romaine & Lange, 1991). This theory is dissected and expanded upon to give the reader a fuller understanding of the dynamics and timeline of this process. Examples of this are illustrated as the authors explain historical uses of “like”. “We believe the use of quotative ‘like’ is spreading. We have observed it in the colloquial speech of educated people in their 30s, and even occasionally in print” (Romaine & Lange, 1991, pg. 269).

The introduction of grammaticalization as a theoretical model of semantic discourse allowed me to look at the contribution made by Ebonics. Within this area of cultural language, the theory of meaning encompasses both semantic *and* foundational

theories. (Ogbu, 1999) investigates the influence and impact of cultural speech through the lens of the African-American community. While studying the array of common English words understood by both white and black communities, (Ogbu,1999) discovered that subtleties in the vernacular and dialect of the latter group caused them to be set apart socially, educationally, and economically. He found a number of interesting socio cultural topics which stem from the meanings of words and the African-American community's identity ties with these words. Much as the previous studies noted, the researcher speaks of "like" as quotative speech and a cultural identity marker of the white youth culture; with dialectal usage among blacks reinforcing these same ties in similar fashion. (Ogbu 1999) illustrates this argument by introducing yet another component into the matrix of semantics and understanding; that of speech community. According to Ogbu,

...a speech community is a population that shares both a common language...and a common theory of speaking or cultural rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech acts....each language or dialect may be associated with its own cultural rules of usage (1999, pg. 150).

This revelation to the theory of semantics is meaningful as it reinforces the theme of the capstone under study; this in turn can be used to investigate what sociological influences contribute to and affect word usage among youths. Conversely, further exploratory possibilities are to be examined regarding the extent that youth culture depends on using the "right" words. How does this demographic welcome and invite words and the meaning of words to construct its community?

John Gumperz studied these forms of cultural languages and introduced the theory of "cross talk", which includes Ebonics. This coined term comes from the larger umbrella of interactional sociolinguistics. The essential definition of this tenet is that many cultures

understand, react to, engage with, and identify those who belong based on how they use and interpret language nuances, word order presentation and/or omission, body languages, and many other subtle, yet culturally learned “clues”. For example, someone who did not understand how the word “nigga” is used by certain members of the African-American community would take umbrage at this word. There is no doubt that, historically, it has racist and dark overtones. Now, it has been embraced within a specific class of the African-American population to define others who belong to this same subset.

Inserting my own first person experiences to augment and support the cross talk theory, I know that, not only using words in the above manner are crucial, but even the *omission* of words can be construed in a counterproductive manner (to group inclusion) and take on drastic proportions. One example was the failure of a group member to omit from the conversation the fact that someone new to the group had a reputation as a *rata*; Latino prison lingo for an informant. This oversight in communication was seen as a holistic threat to the social structure, safety, and solidarity of the larger matrix, resulting in the first group member being deemed a liability. His trust had been compromised, which resulted in lethal consequences. I use this example, not for shock value, but to support my argument as to the importance of omitting words.

This phenomenon is further explored and articulated in *Living at the edges of capitalism* (Grubačić & O'Hearn, 2016). Their chapter on prison activism follows the journey of prisoners to form a collective identity in the face of systemic and systematic abuse and discussion. “Learning Irish gave the prisoners a sense of agency because they could communicate with confidence that the guards would not understand them...[t]he

Irish language was related to broader cultural production...” Furthermore, “...cultural production was tied to trust and solidarity” (Grubačić & O’Hearn, 2016, pp. 191-193) The employment of cross talk to develop this collective identity, in an exilic environment becomes an important unifying feature in this close knit community while at the same time excluding those who fell outside of this circle. Thus, the inclusion/exclusion paradigm works in tandem with the cross talk aspect of interactional sociolinguistics.

Ben Rampton’s paper on linguistic ethnography and interactional sociolinguistics parallels Gumperz’ crosstalk theory. Both researchers open a sociological window into the inner workings of identity politics and social class hierarchies based on the former. Cross talk is but one component of identity politics. The significance of this study illustrates how narratives, images, and rhetoric is able to hold sway on one social group but not another. (Rampton, 2008). The author also cautions against “losing sight of what [Michel] Foucault called the ‘immediate struggles’” (Rampton, 2008, pg. 1) in the rush to demonize anything that falls outside of one’s inner sanctum of identity culturalism. The immediate struggle being the need to address systematic and systemic failures of society to recognize the validity of a concept that is foreign to them. The lesson here applies equally to the practitioner of identity politics.

In conclusion, the theory of meaning is one foundation for further examination of my research focus based on the number of times this theory of grammaticalization appeared. This theory also warrants further study and expansion into the social effects it conveys. For instance, to what extent (long term) would the inclusion or exclusion of young people, into their social group, hinge on using certain words and certain language?

This and other research into youth culture would be one facet of the theoretical framework applicable to my research topic and from which much of my argumentation will emerge. Interactional sociolinguistics and crosstalk figures prominently throughout this paper. This theory not only explains the generational and sociological issues, but the identity politics found within this culture of language. Ebonics, college slang, Valley Girl speak, prison jargon, etc. all embrace and celebrate cross talk while rejecting any foreign infiltration into their camps. The degree and level of acceptance and/or rejection varies from one social group to the next.

### **Methodology**

Using a mixed method research approach, I employed surveys, field notes, and primary source data from participant-observational resources to compile information on the effect specific language utterances have on social interaction and the processes involved in forming cohesiveness and developing collective identity within these groups.

#### **Survey**

A survey was created with CSUMB's Qualtrics forms, a university software application collecting information from participants using customized surveys. I distributed the form via student university email accounts with the aid of SBS faculty. Responses were then linked to a spreadsheet and answers were automatically recorded. Cross analysis embedded in the software package enabled me to further examine correlations between two or more demographics. This survey was active from March 4 to March 13, 2020 and incorporated data collected from CSUMB and Hartnell community

college students. In addition, and for comparison purposes, I included statistics from an online social media platform, of participants who fell outside of these parameters. These overall indicators came from a collection of 211 respondents. Datum represented 125 females, 44 males, and 1 who declined to answer (41 preferred not to answer the question at all). Although ethnicity was irrelevant to my research, I included this for demographic purposes. There were a total of 95 Latino/a(s), 36 whites, 8 others, 5 Asian/Americans, 2 African-American, 2 prefer not to answer, 1 Native American, and 1 Pacific Islander. It was crucial that a range of ages were represented as my research hinged on social ties formed by word utterances within specific age groups. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 45. Stratification of age demographics into blocks of ten year age differences (26-35, 36-45, 45+) helped codify response-specific answers to survey questions.

The outcome of this survey served to gain a fuller understanding of the impact word usage held in forming alliances and friendships in social groups or disunity and detachment in these same groups. This was helpful to my research in keeping track of, for instance, the number of participants who used *these* words versus how many use *those* words. The frequency and percentage of use; age range and percentage each respondent used these particular words was calculated and results were integrated with the qualitative findings.

I explored the various language nuances and complexities that affected interaction and/or form social cohesiveness and collectivism in youth groups. The sharing of an official common language established a natural cultural solidarity; however my objective was to demonstrate if sharing, participating and ownership of an informal language based

on collective identity operated in similar fashion. Some questions used the Likert rating scale to measure intensity in agreement or disagreement toward survey questions. Several questions were open-ended, designed to stimulate dialogue and highlighted the frequency participants used the informal language such as “like”, “actually”, and “basically” in conversation. These were included to track the conditions wherein language protocol was used more around peer groups within certain demographics. Various scenarios were introduced to monitor their control of these situational uses of the word, for instance, in a formal presentation and to what extent they forged a connection with those who used collective language.

I was subject to some limitations using a survey form. The biggest being an inability to dialogue face to face with respondents. These restrictions were especially manifested during the examination of survey answers requiring textual input. For instance, it was most interesting to quantify participants’ answers to questions based on the Likert scale, and compare them to similar questions asking for actual, text based responses. This may have been due to a cultural or generational misunderstanding of certain questions or other factors. The ultimate goal of these surveys formulated a working hypothesis centered on the impact informal language held in generational culture. Within the youth sector, this idiomatic language is the main common denominator.

### **Field notes and Auto-ethnography**

Also included in this report are two ethnographical chronicles detailing first-person field studies into this venture. Monitoring unobtrusively, I listened to, recorded,

transcribed and analyzed real time conversations capturing this social phenomenon. These dictations support my hypothesis that words (and the context in which these are used) augment interaction; likewise they were also actors in promoting the opposite. While the outcomes of many of these interactions were repeated, the overarching theme was the same: informal and colloquial language in a relaxed and natural setting promoted camaraderie and inclusiveness. In these field observances, I was not able to document any cases where the opposite was true: distancing or a lack of rapport with those who did not fit into this social group.

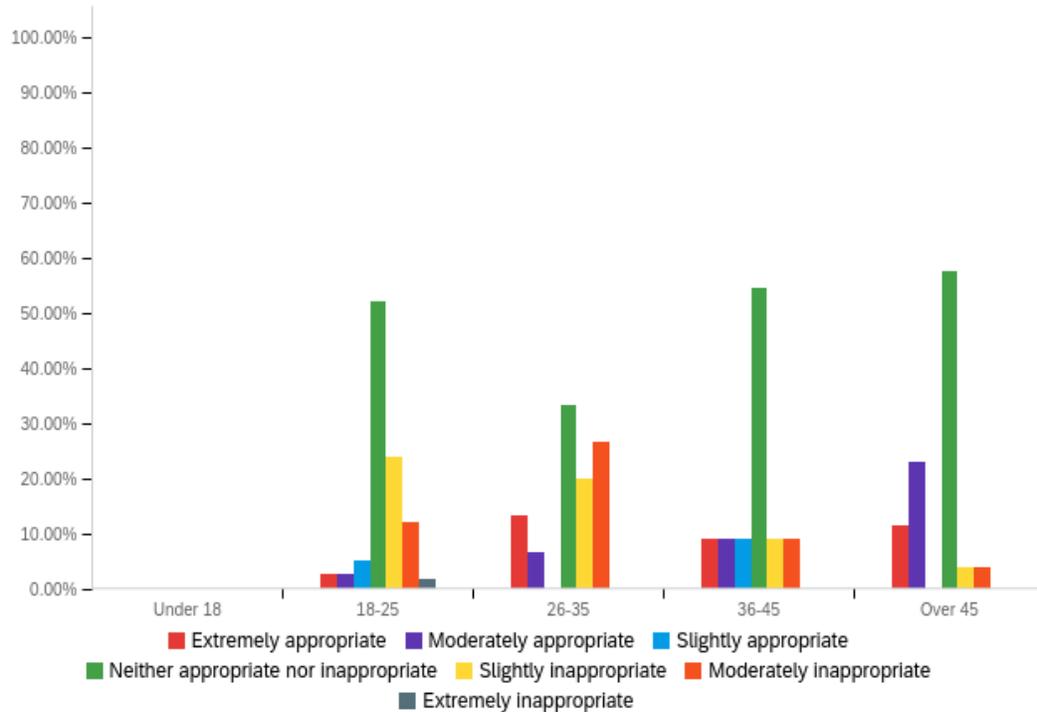
While not documented in any formal, academic capacity; I relied on personal experiences and memories to supplement and support any research done here; inserting my own first person accounts of prison society, language, experiences and politics in an effort to lend a quality of personal authority beyond the constraints of scholarship and field studies. This first person account helped illustrate the vernacular within the prison culture. These experiences and the politics of language, from the unique standpoint epistemology of one who was exiled; contrasts, compares and validates this personal experience as a relevant vantage point to be considered and included in this study.

## **Results**

Focused on the current population of American social communities, I explored ways in which language influenced interaction and impacted social bonds. I researched the extent specific word utterances contributed to and affected cohesiveness and collectivism in generational groups, based on a process of linguistic anthropology, language evolution, and cross talk theory. I also studied the development of collective

character in American culture and how language connection has been adopted, molded, claimed and used to express a unique spatial and temporal shift in social and generational identity. I was interested in discovering, through various methods, how language, jargon, and slang promoted or excluded intragroup and/or intergroup relations and encouraged collective identity in social communities. I also wanted to chart what the effects of specific language utterances have on social interaction and what are the processes involved in developing cohesiveness in social groups.

In Figure 1 (below), survey participants were asked to respond to the question “How appropriate do you feel it would be if someone in their 40's (or older) began to speak as you and your friends speak?” It is worth mentioning here I originally expected to receive survey responses from CSUMB and Hartnell college students exclusively, however, once my survey was shared on social media, participants represented a wide spectrum of age groups ranging from 18 to over 45. This is relevant to my research because it revealed new perspectives that impacted the overall results and scope of this capstone.



**FIG. 1:** Chart shows the percentage of respondents, by age group, who felt it was either appropriate or inappropriate if someone in their 40's (or older)\* began to speak in the same manner as their own social group spoke.

\*This question was originally intended to gauge the reaction of respondents aged 18-25.

Seeking to gather additional data on which social conditions were present in the usage of “basically, literally”, and “like”, I categorized situations that precipitated the usage of informal, slang language. Utilizing gender as the independent variable, the most common reason(s) given for using these words were:

- Females:
  - Casual conversations (39 total or 27%)
  - Explaining (17 total or 12%)
  - Nervousness (11 total or 7%)
  - Stress (5 total or 3%)<sup>1</sup>
- Males:
  - Explaining (13 total or 30%)
  - Casual conversations (8 total or 18%)
  - Nervousness (0 or 0%)

<sup>1</sup> These figures and percentages reflect *only* the specific demographic, not of total respondents; i.e. 27% of females, 30% of males, etc.

Of the overall population, 42.9% found it moderately challenging to monitor their use of these words. This figure represented 45.6% of females and 36.4% of males. The percentage of males who found it not challenging at all was 27.3%, while 12.8% of females found it not challenging at all. This was compared to 6.4% of females who found it extremely challenging to monitor their use of these words versus 2.3% of males in this same category. Most participants stated they would not use informal slang while speaking with their professors (2% of males and females stated they would) or with strangers (4% of males and .8% of females would). I asked, “How professional would you consider peers who overuse ‘basically, literally,’ or ‘like’ in conversation?” The dependent variable measured the degree of professionalism they assigned to the question, while age was used as the independent variable, Most responded “neither professional or unprofessional”; however, in every stratified level, e.g. “slightly, moderately, extremely” (professional or unprofessional); males answered in the affirmative nearly 2:1 over females. Two notable exceptions were “moderately unprofessional”: 11.9% for males and 11.4% for females and “extremely professional”: 4.8% for males and 0% for females. data in figure 2 shows the following:

	Q1: What is your age?					
	Total	18-25	26-35	36-45	Over 45	Under 18
Total Count	157	110	11	10	26	0
Extremely professional	2	2	0	0	0	0
Extremely unprofessional	8	3	1	0	4	0
Moderately professional	7	5	0	0	2	0
Moderately unprofessional	18	11	1	2	4	0
Neither professional nor unprofessional	80	58	4	6	12	0
Slightly professional	6	6	0	0	0	0
Slightly unprofessional	36	25	5	2	4	0
Extremely professional	1.3%	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Extremely unprofessional	5.1%	2.7%	9.1%	0.0%	15.4%	0.0%
Moderately professional	4.5%	4.5%	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%	0.0%
Moderately unprofessional	11.5%	10.0%	9.1%	20.0%	15.4%	0.0%
Neither professional nor unprofessional	51.0%	52.7%	36.4%	60.0%	46.2%	0.0%
Slightly professional	3.8%	5.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Slightly unprofessional	22.9%	22.7%	45.5%	20.0%	15.4%	0.0%

**Fig. 2: Data shows the degree of professionalism participants assign to peers who overuse slang words.**

Participants were asked to input textual responses to the question, “How does the use of specific language enhance or exclude who you would consider to be part of your social circle?” The unique challenges and complexities involved in quantifying textual data and creating visuals prompted the creation of a Word Cloud (Fig. 3) highlighting the words repeated most often; however the inherent flaws in this method are that the prominent words must be viewed holistically and considered in its proper context. Consequently, this process does not lend itself to illustrating the data in a proper visual manner.



**FIG. 3:** This Word Cloud illustrates the frequency of the most prevalent words in relation to the question, “How does the use of specific language enhance or exclude who you would consider to be part of your social circle?”

## Discussion

After analyzing and synthesizing key responses to my survey, I determined that specific language utterances *do* have an effect on social interaction and are a factor in promoting cohesiveness in social groups. Conversely, these utterances also served to exclude those who fall outside of one’s social demographic. I found there were key differences between female and male responses. Females felt “proper” word usage were more of a factor in determining exclusion or inclusion. There were more males, percentage wise, who answered that it was easier to monitor their use of informal language and yet, when asked their opinions regarding peers who used these words in professional settings,

males stated this behavior was “professional, extremely professional, or moderately professional” overwhelmingly when compared to females.

The principal determinant in this study was clearly generational, where there were *zero* respondents in the over 25 age group who considered slang in any way professional compared to 13 in the 18-25 who did. This suggests that emphasis on appropriate and exact language is less important to younger individuals. This finding is supported by analyzing explicitly structured questions. However, it is of special interest to note that, when presented with limited choice Likert scale questions, all four age groups answered overwhelmingly neutral regarding acceptance and/or rejection (neither appropriate or inappropriate). Yet, contradictory data, as verified by studying participants’ written responses when prompted, revealed that commonalities in colloquial language *do* impact their choice in social companions. Many responded how certain word utterances influence who they felt comfortable socializing with. This discrepancy can be further illustrated by considering the following selected quotes:

- *“I used to work with people 15 years younger than me and when I was around the kids, I picked up on the way they phrased words, and shortened our language...If I didn't work with the younger generation, I would have not understood how they spoke”. Female, 26-35*
- *“I think that the slang I use would be confusing to those outside my friend group so it is an unintentional barrier to those outside my social circle”. Male, 18-25*
- *“If you know the language then it'll strengthen your identity and relationship with people who share that language whereas if you don't your more likely to be excluded if not exiled from any attempt to join the group”. Female, 18-25*

There were also a fair number of respondents who stated that language utterances did *not* influence their social circle; however this observation only serves to further

support my argument that most people are not neutral when considering language as a determining factor in forming and strengthening connections. So, the overarching finding in this capstone is that the presence of specific language utterances and key buzz words has a direct bearing on one's specific social community. Words serve to either include or exclude those who fall outside of these parameters.

### **Conclusion**

This capstone presented many challenges as well as some surprising and unexpected results from the data gathered. I originally held a hypothesis, based on my own informal observations, that word utterances such as “literally, basically”, and “like ” have mutated and are being embraced by American youth culture. Language is evolving as it recognizes an informal and cultural shifting in meanings of certain traditional words. These words no longer hold the dictionary definition familiar to many people in my age group. Word utterances serve multiple functions beyond the communication of information, such as fillers and/or stress reductants. Some of these words were used as “pause” words. Some to indicate internal thoughts and as connecting links between two independent thoughts. Some were used as stalling tactics to gather one's thoughts. Still others indicated emphatic emotion and level of intensity in a conversation. The transformative factor involved in this process was natural, accepted, and understood more by the 18-25 youth demographic, in this research project, than with any of the other age groups studied.

Among the older age groups studied in this capstone, these words held some influence, but as a whole, were not as ingrained in their daily conversational modes to the extent that the youngest age group was. The older participants did not place so much of an emphasis on word usage as an inclusive factor as did the younger set. While nearly every age group felt that words, and the context in which they are used, was important in establishing group connections, the importance of words take on different aspects when applied to a specific generational group. Even though all social groups were affected in both a positive and/or negative way by words, the older respondents did not subscribe to peer pressure as did the college students. Additionally the older generations share a stigma that youth who use and overuse phrases or slang terms (such as “like”) are less intelligent than those who only speak in proper standardized English, however, this view was not empirically supported.

Aside from the age differential, gender was also a significant factor in this study. From the data gathered in surveys, males seemed to not rely on colloquial language as much as females in certain sociological circumstances: e.g. stress related situations and instances when they are nervous. Even though, percentage wise, there were more males who answered that it was easier to monitor their use of informal language than females, they also stated their opinions regarding peers who used these words in professional settings, was “professional, extremely professional, or moderately professional” This contrasted overwhelmingly when compared to females.

Paradoxically, another area of special interest to note is that, when presented with limited choice Likert scale questions, all of the age groups answered they felt neutral

regarding acceptance and/or rejection of anyone who fell outside of their social group speaking in the same manner as they did. Yet, contradictory data, as verified by studying participants' written responses when prompted, revealed that commonalities in colloquial language *do* impact their choice in social companions. Many responded how certain word utterances influence who they felt comfortable socializing with.

Looking beyond this capstone, I believe it would be an advantageous contribution to existing literature on language, and the impact it holds on social connections, to do in-depth qualitative studies calling for concrete, text based answers to survey questions. It is my opinion these types of questions produce answers that are more indicative of the true feelings and attitudes of the respondents, while multiple choice and Likert type questions did not actually capture an accurate representation of their thoughts or feelings. This opinion is based on the discrepancies mentioned in my paper between the two modes. The former *forces* a specific answer, while the latter two offer the respondent a generic way out; a path of least resistance, so to speak.

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