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Buzzwords in the Media: Analyzing Representations of Language Change Ideologies

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Abstract

This study investigates how internet buzzwords in media discourse represent language change ideologies and public attitudes toward popular culture. It adopts a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative word-formation analysis with qualitative media-context analysis. The lexical dataset consists of 62 English buzzword entries published in Macmillan Dictionary' . (n.d.) BuzzWord database between 2016 and 2020. These entries were classified according to their dominant word-formation processes, including compounding, collocation, blending, affixation, conversion, acronym/initialism, borrowing, clause formation, and onomatopoeia. To strengthen methodological transparency, a second coder independently classified the full dataset, and inter-coder reliability was calculated before analytical reconciliation. The findings show that compounding and collocation are the most frequent patterns, while blending becomes especially visible in later entries. Contextual analysis of Brexit, breadcrumbing, green swan, and reacji further shows how buzzwords index political stance, mediated intimacy, environmental responsibility, and platform-shaped communication. The study argues that buzzwords are not merely temporary lexical fashions; they are mediatized linguistic resources through which speakers and media institutions name social change, evaluate cultural practices, and negotiate language ideologies.

Keywords: internet buzzwords, language ideology, indexicality, enregisterment, media sociolinguistics, word formation, popular culture

1. Introduction

Language is a central medium through which people communicate social meanings, evaluate others, and participate in public life. As O'Grady et al. (O'Grady et al., 1997) explain, language is not only a formal system but also a resource for social interaction. Language ideologies, therefore, concern culturally situated beliefs about what language is, how it should be used, and what particular linguistic forms are thought to reveal about speakers and communities. Woolard (Woolard, 2020) emphasizes that language ideologies are morally and politically charged representations of language in social life, while Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) show

that such ideologies connect linguistic practices with broader social values, identities, and power relations.

Media discourse is especially important for language change because media institutions, online platforms, and participatory digital cultures accelerate the circulation of new expressions. Coupland (Coupland, 2010) argues that media are not neutral channels that merely transmit linguistic change; rather, they participate in producing and evaluating social meanings. Internet buzzwords are, therefore, useful objects of sociolinguistic inquiry. They emerge quickly, circulate widely, and often condense complex social events into memorable and reusable linguistic forms. Qu (Qu, 2020) similarly argues that network buzzwords reflect audience psychology and cultural communication in the digital era.

This paper examines buzzwords as linguistic forms that link media discourse, popular culture, and language ideology. Popular culture is understood here not simply as entertainment, but as a field in which everyday social meanings are produced and circulated. Fiske (Fiske, 2010) treats popular culture as a site of active meaning-making, while Adorno and Horkheimer (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997) offer a more critical account of culture as shaped by institutional and commercial forces. Buzzwords sit between these perspectives: they are often produced from below through everyday language play, yet they become socially powerful through media circulation, platform uptake, and public commentary.

The study contributes to research on language change and media sociolinguistics by combining a descriptive analysis of word-formation patterns with a more theory-driven analysis of media contexts. Rather than treating buzzwords as merely fashionable vocabulary, the paper asks how they become indexical signs of social stance and cultural value. In doing so, it responds to the need for greater methodological transparency, clearer coding procedures, and a stronger analytical framework for connecting linguistic form with ideology.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language Ideology and Language Change

Language ideology research examines how beliefs about language are embedded in social practice. Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) define language ideology as a field concerned with cultural conceptions of linguistic structure and use. Woolard (2020) further highlights that these conceptions are not neutral descriptions of language; they are bound to moral evaluation, social authority, and political interests. From this perspective, new words are never purely formal innovations. They are interpreted, accepted, mocked, circulated, or rejected through ideological assumptions about what counts as appropriate, fashionable, intelligent, vulgar, efficient, or authentic language.

Buzzwords are particularly valuable for studying language ideology because they often appear at moments of social change. Their meanings are unstable at first, but repeated media circulation can make them recognizable signs of particular domains or stances. A buzzword may therefore index not only a referential meaning, such as a political event or dating practice, but also a position toward that phenomenon. This makes buzzwords useful evidence for studying how public attitudes toward cultural change become attached to linguistic forms.

2.2. Indexicality, Enregisterment, and Media Sociolinguistics

The concepts of indexicality and enregisterment provide a stronger theoretical basis for connecting word formation with language ideology. Silverstein (2003) argues that linguistic forms acquire layered social meanings through indexical orders. In other words, a word may first point to an object or event,

but through repeated use it can also point to social identities, values, and stances associated with that use. Eckert (Eckert, 2008) similarly proposes that linguistic variables participate in indexical fields, where meanings such as modernity, informality, expertise, irony, or resistance may cluster around a form.

Agha (Agha, 2003) uses the concept of enregisterment to describe how linguistic forms become recognized as socially meaningful registers through circulation and metapragmatic commentary. Applied to buzzwords, enregisterment helps explain how an expression moves from novelty to recognizability: media texts define it, quote it, joke about it, and connect it with particular social types or cultural moments. Androutsopoulos (Androutsopoulos, 2014) extends this view by showing that mediatization changes the conditions under which linguistic resources circulate and gain value. Online media, social platforms, and news commentary make buzzwords highly mobile and rapidly indexical.

2.3. Internet Buzzwords and Popular Culture

Previous studies have examined internet buzzwords mainly in relation to communication, popularity, and lexical creativity. Qu (Qu, 2020) discusses the diffusion of network buzzwords from a communication perspective and emphasizes their dependence on digital media environments. Luo (2022) treats internet buzzwords as a form of popular culture and argues that they reflect social trends, collective attitudes, and cultural participation. Malyuga and Rimmer (Malyuga & Rimmer, 2021) show that buzzwords can be better understood through their co-occurring contexts rather than by isolated definitions alone.

These studies provide an important foundation, but two issues remain. First, word-formation analysis alone cannot fully explain how buzzwords become ideologically meaningful. Second, dictionary entries provide useful definitions but do not show the full media contexts in which meanings circulate. This study, therefore, combines a lexical dataset with a small media-context sub-corpus. The aim is to show how formal patterns of lexical innovation interact with contextual uptake in news, lifestyle media, environmental discourse, and platform communication.

3. Research Questions

This study is guided by two research questions:

- RQ1. From a word-formation perspective, what trends can be identified in English internet buzzwords published in the Macmillan Dictionary BuzzWord database from 2016 to 2020?
- RQ2. How do selected buzzwords index social meanings and language ideologies in representative media contexts?

4. Methodology

4.1. Dataset and Sampling

The study uses a two-layer research design. The first layer is a lexical dataset drawn from Macmillan Dictionary's BuzzWord database. The dataset includes 62 English buzzword entries published between 2016 and 2020. This five-year period was selected because it captures a compact but socially eventful period in which political discourse, online dating practices, environmental risk language, and platform-mediated communication became visible in public media discourse. The unit of analysis is the individual buzzword entry.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: the item had to be listed as a BuzzWord entry by Macmillan Dictionary, published between 2016 and 2020, and presented as an English lexical

item or multi-word expression. Items were excluded if they appeared only as examples within another entry, were duplicated, or could not be clearly linked to a publication year. Because some items combine more than one linguistic mechanism, each entry was assigned one dominant category. The frequency results, therefore, report dominant coding categories for 62 entries rather than all possible alternative analyses.

4.2. Coding Scheme and Reliability

The buzzwords were classified according to a codebook of word-formation processes. Each entry was coded for its dominant word-formation process. When an item contained more than one possible process, the dominant process was determined by asking which mechanism most directly explained the surface form and semantic innovation of the item. For example, Brexit was treated as blending because it compresses Britain and exit into a new lexical form, while green swan was treated as collocation because it combines existing words into a recognizable multi-word expression with a metaphorical meaning. The coding scheme was designed to make the analysis replicable rather than to imply that each buzzword has only one possible linguistic interpretation.

To assess coding reliability, a second coder independently classified all 62 entries using the same codebook. Before calculation, the second coder's alternative labels "Acronym" and "Initialism" were normalized to the codebook category "Acronym/initialism". The two coders agreed on 24 of the 62 entries, producing a percentage agreement of 38.7%. Cohen (1960) kappa was .305, which indicates fair agreement on Landis and Koch (1977) descriptive scale. This result shows that the coding categories were usable but that several boundaries, especially compounding versus blending and collocation versus clause, remained interpretively challenging. The disagreements were therefore retained in the audit trail and considered when qualifying the findings.

Table 1. Coding Scheme for Word-Formation Processes

Category	Operational definition	Example from the dataset
Affixation	A new form produced through prefixes, suffixes, or other bound morphemes.	cakeism; -washing; -fluencer
Compounding	A form created by combining two or more existing lexical items into a compound or hyphenated form.	moto-doping; scale-up; youth-speak
Conversion	A word used in a new grammatical category without visible change in form; in this dataset, this includes proper-name-to-verb uses recorded as -ing forms.	voldemorting; plogging; Marleying
Blending	A form created by merging shortened or overlapping parts of two or more words.	Brexit; reacji; infodemic
Acronym/initialism	A form created from initial letters or pronounced letter sequences.	STEAM; BAME; Makaton
Collocation	A multi-word expression whose meaning emerges from repeated co-occurrence and phrase-level conventionalization.	green swan; deep learning; fast fashion

Category	Operational definition	Example from the dataset
Clause	A phrase or clause treated as a recognizable lexicalized expression.	See what I did there?
Borrowing	A word borrowed from another language or cultural-linguistic source.	hygge; gammon
Onomatopoeia	A form motivated by sound imitation.	zoom

4.3. Media-Context Sub-Corpus

To address the limitation of relying on dictionary definitions alone, the second layer of data consists of a media-context sub-corpus. Four representative buzzwords were selected because they represent the main word-formation patterns identified in the quantitative analysis and because they point to distinct domains of public discourse: politics, intimate relationships, environmental risk, and digital communication. For each case, at least one representative media context was used to examine how the term indexes social meanings and ideological positions.

Table 2. Media-Context Sub-Corpus for Selected Buzzwords

Buzzword	Formation type	Representative media context	Indexed social meaning	Ideological dimension
Brexit	Blending	News and political commentary on the UK referendum	Political stance, national identity, and public division	National sovereignty versus globalization
breadcrumbing	Compounding/metaphorical extension	Lifestyle and online dating discourse	Digital intimacy, uncertainty, and emotional labour	Changing norms of mediated relationships
green swan	Collocation/metaphor	Environmental and financial risk commentary	Climate responsibility and systemic risk awareness	Sustainability and ecological accountability
reacji	Blending	Platform communication and Slack-related usage	Efficient nonverbal response and reduced conversational noise	Acceptance of emoji-based and platform-shaped language

4.4. Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, all 62 entries were entered into a spreadsheet with year, word form, definition, and dominant word-formation category. Second, descriptive frequency counts were produced to identify dominant patterns and trends over time. Third, the four selected buzzwords were analysed through the framework of indexicality and enregisterment. The contextual analysis asked what the term denotes, what social stance or value it indexes, and how media circulation helps stabilize or contest that meaning.

5. Findings

5.1. Word-Formation Patterns

Table 3 presents the frequency of dominant word-formation processes identified in the 62-entry lexical dataset. The most frequent patterns are compounding and collocation, followed by blending. These three categories together dominate the dataset and suggest that buzzwords are often produced by recombining familiar linguistic materials rather than by creating entirely new forms from nothing. The fair inter-coder reliability result also suggests that the distinction between adjacent categories should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 3. Frequency of Word-Formation Processes in the Buzzword Dataset

Word-formation process	Frequency	Percentage of entries
Affixation	6	9.7%
Compounding	20	32.3%
Conversion	3	4.8%
Blending	9	14.5%
Acronyms/ initialisms	3	4.8%
Collocation	17	27.4%
Clause	1	1.6%
Borrowing	2	3.2%
Onomatopoeia	1	1.6%

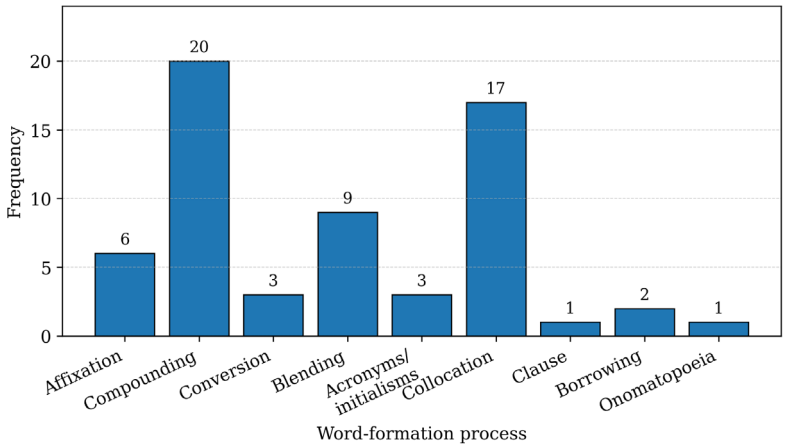

Figure 1. Frequency of Word-Formation Processes in the Buzzword Dataset

As shown in Figure 1, compounding accounts for the largest number of entries, followed by collocation and blending. This pattern indicates that buzzwords often rely on recognisable lexical material. Such recognisability may help buzzwords circulate quickly because audiences can infer their meanings from existing words, while still perceiving the new combinations as fresh, playful, or topical. The high frequency of collocation also suggests that buzzword innovation is not limited to single-word neologisms; multi-word expressions can become equally salient when they repeatedly appear in media discourse.

5.2. Trends Over Time

Figure 2 focuses on the three most prominent processes: compounding, blending, and collocation. Compounding declines from 2016 to 2020, while blending becomes more visible in 2020. Collocation fluctuates across the five-year period, reaching its highest point in 2018. These descriptive trends should be interpreted cautiously because the dataset is small and curated. Even so, the pattern suggests a shift from relatively transparent compounds toward more compressed and playful forms, especially in digital and platform-related domains.

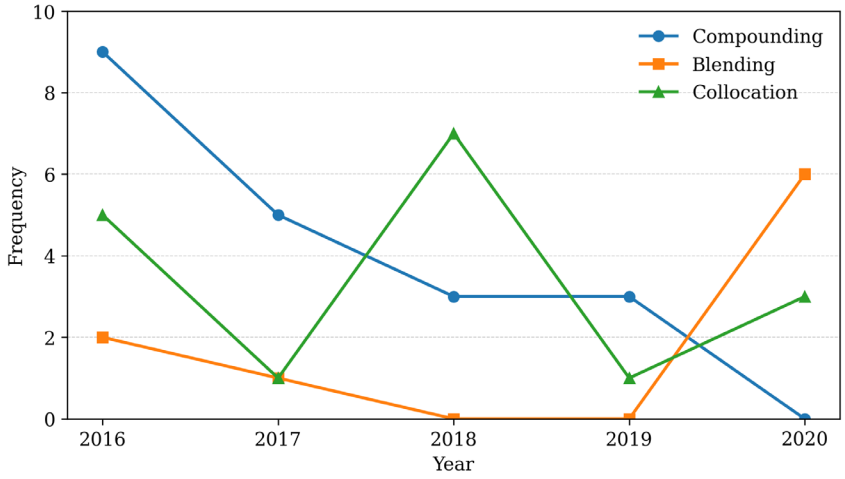

Figure 2. Yearly Trends in Major Word-Formation Processes, 2016-2020

The prominence of compounding and collocation reflects a pragmatic tendency in buzzword formation. These processes allow speakers and media writers to package familiar meanings into compact expressions. Blending, by contrast, often requires more creative interpretation because it compresses two semantic domains into one form. This compression can make a buzzword memorable and media-friendly, especially when it names a rapidly changing social or technological phenomenon.

5.3. Contextual and Ideological Analysis

Brexit is a blend of Britain and exit. In news discourse, it operates not only as a label for the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union but also as a stance marker. The Economist (2016) framed Brexit as a political risk for Britain and the West, showing that the term quickly became embedded in evaluative political discourse. Through repeated media circulation, Brexit became enregistered as a compact sign of national sovereignty debates, anti-globalization sentiment, institutional distrust, and polarized public identity. Its form is important: the blend compresses a complex political process into a memorable, headline-friendly lexical item. This supports Silverstein (2003) view that linguistic signs can acquire higher-order social meanings beyond reference.

Breadcrumbing describes a dating practice in which a person maintains another person's interest through intermittent signals of attention without intending commitment. In lifestyle media, the term is linked with platform practices such as direct messages, likes, and sporadic online contact (Swantek, 2017). The term metaphorically extends the image of leaving breadcrumbs into the domain of digital intimacy. Its ideological significance lies in how it frames mediated relationships as uncertain, strategic, and emotionally asymmetrical. The buzzword, therefore, indexes changing attitudes toward romance, attention, and accountability in platform-mediated social life.

Green swan is a collocation and metaphor that adapts the better-known expression, black swan, to climate-related risk. In environmental and financial commentary, green swan refers to systemic climate risks created by human activity and intensified by ecological instability (Zwick, 2020). The term indexes an ideology of environmental responsibility: climate change is not treated as a distant natural accident, but as a socially produced risk connected to markets, policy, and human behaviour. The phrase also shows how buzzwords can use metaphor to make abstract systemic problems more communicable in public discourse.

Reacji is a blend of reaction and emoji. It refers to emoji-based responses used in platform communication, especially in Slack-related contexts. Unlike traditional written replies, reacjis allow users to acknowledge, evaluate, or route messages through a single visual sign. The term indexes a language ideology in which efficient, nonverbal, and platform-shaped communication is treated as legitimate. It also illustrates how digital platforms contribute to language change by making interface features into named communicative practices. In Agha's (Agha, 2003) terms, repeated platform use and commentary help enregister reacji as part of a recognizable digital communication register.

Across the four cases, buzzwords function as more than lexical labels. They condense social commentary, circulate through media contexts, and become signs of public stance. Brexit indexes political identity and national positioning; breadcrumbing indexes anxieties about digital intimacy; green swan indexes ecological responsibility and systemic risk; and reacji indexes acceptance of platform-mediated, emoji-based interaction. These findings support the argument that buzzwords are mediatized linguistic resources through which language users negotiate social values and cultural change.

6. Discussion

The findings show that buzzword formation is both linguistic and ideological. On the formal level, the dominance of compounding, collocation, and blending suggests that contemporary buzzwords tend to be built from familiar linguistic materials. This makes them accessible, memorable, and easy to circulate. On the ideological level, however, these forms acquire meanings through media contexts. A buzzword becomes socially significant when it is repeatedly attached to particular events, behaviours, identities, or values.

The study also demonstrates the usefulness of indexicality and enregisterment for analysing buzzwords. Brexit and reacji, for instance, are not merely blends; they become signs of political and technological change through repeated uptake. Green swan is not merely a collocation; it becomes a metaphorical register of climate risk. Breadcrumbing is not merely a playful dating term; it indexes judgments about emotional responsibility and platform behaviour. These examples show that word formation provides the formal basis for a buzzword, but media circulation gives it ideological force.

The revised analysis also addresses the methodological limitations of a dictionary-only approach. Macmillan Dictionary provides a manageable and curated lexical dataset, but dictionary entries alone cannot show how meanings are negotiated in public discourse. The added media-context sub-corpus, therefore, strengthens the analysis by connecting lexical form with representative contexts of use. Nevertheless, the corpus remains small, and the findings should be understood as exploratory rather than generalizable. A larger future study could use newspaper databases, social media corpora, and diachronic frequency tools to examine how buzzwords spread, stabilize, or disappear over time.

The reliability check is methodologically important because it reveals where buzzword classification is most ambiguous. The second coder frequently interpreted -ing forms such as

breadcrumbing, voldemorting, and plogging as affixation, whereas the original coding treated several of these items as compounding or conversion according to the study's dominant-process rule. The second coder also often classified multi-word expressions such as mic drop, gig economy, and health halo as clauses rather than collocations. These disagreements do not invalidate the analysis, but they show that word-formation categories are analytical decisions that require explicit operational definitions. For this reason, the discussion emphasizes broad tendencies, especially the prominence of compounding, collocation, and blending, rather than treating every fine-grained category boundary as self-evident.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined internet buzzwords as mediatized linguistic forms that represent language change ideologies and public attitudes toward popular culture. The quantitative analysis shows that compounding, collocation, and blending are the most prominent word-formation processes in the dataset. These processes reveal a tendency toward pragmatic compression, recognizability, and creative recombination. The qualitative analysis shows that selected buzzwords index social meanings related to politics, relationships, environmental risk, and digital communication.

The paper argues that buzzwords should not be treated as superficial or temporary vocabulary alone. They are linguistic resources through which media users and institutions name emerging phenomena, evaluate social change, and negotiate cultural values. By combining word-formation analysis with indexical and media-context analysis, the study provides a clearer account of how buzzwords connect linguistic innovation with ideology. The main limitations are the small curated dataset and the restricted number of media contexts. Future research should use larger corpora, systematic social media sampling, and full inter-coder reliability procedures to further test the patterns identified here.

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