

ALAY'S USE OF LANGUAGE AMONG GENERATION Z: IDENTITY, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND RESISTANCE TO LINGUISTIC NORMS

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Abstract: *The phenomenon of Alay language reflects the changing ways Generation Z communicates in the digital era. Emerging from youth creativity on social media, this language serves not only as a communication tool but also as a marker of identity and self-expression. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study analyzes various forms of Alay language across digital platforms and reviews related literature from national and international journals. The findings reveal distinct features such as the use of numbers to replace letters, random capitalization, and word shortening—patterns that highlight the social identity and lifestyle of the digital generation. However, when this informal style enters formal settings like education or the workplace, it raises concerns about declining mastery of standard language and reduced linguistic discipline. Still, the Alay language can be viewed as a natural adaptation to social and technological change, as well as a subtle form of resistance to rigid language norms. Thus, promoting digital language literacy that balances grammatical accuracy with creative expression is essential to ensure that Indonesian remains dynamic, inclusive, and culturally relevant in the digital age.*

Keywords: *Alay Language, Generation Z, Social Media, Identity, Linguistics.*

Introduction

Language has always been a reflection of its time. Amidst the rapid pace of digitalization, Generation Z has grown up as the generation most familiar with technology, social media, and global culture. In virtual spaces such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, they not only share stories and entertainment, but also create new languages that describe who they are. One form of this is alay language, a unique, quirky style of speaking that is often considered a “deviation” from standard language rules. Although some people view alay as nothing more than a joke, it actually embodies a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon concerning identity, creativity, and cultural resistance (Wicaksono & Supriyono, 2021).

Alay language emerged as a result of the interaction between self-expression and the demands of rapid communication in the digital world. Its distinctive usage, such as replacing letters with numbers, random capitalization, or phonetic puns, is not just a style but also a way for the younger generation to mark their presence in the online space. For many teenagers, writing “aQy cYnt4 k4mu bGt” is not just a joke, but a statement of identity that is different from the formal language they consider rigid and bureaucratic. This phenomenon shows how language evolves along with cultural and technological changes, forming a new space of identity where the boundaries between formal and informal are increasingly blurred (Lestarina, 2022).

However, this dynamic also raises serious concerns. Several studies show that the habit of using slang or non-standard language on social media has the potential to weaken the ability of

the younger generation to speak formal Indonesian. For example, students who are accustomed to digital language often find it difficult to write scientific papers with structures and spellings that comply with PUEBI (General Guidelines for Indonesian Spelling) (Khoirunnisa et al., 2023). This rapid change in communication patterns has raised concerns about the erosion of linguistic discipline and the loss of respect for formal linguistic norms.

On the other hand, the use of Alay language can also be interpreted as a form of symbolic resistance against the hegemony of standard language, which is considered to represent only the linguistic “elite.” Generation Z uses this language to demonstrate autonomy and freedom of expression in the digital world, as part of the formation of their social identity. A study by Wagiati et al. (2024) found that digital language practices in Indonesia reflect a search for new identities influenced by social pressures, popular culture, and technological dynamics. Similar findings were reported by Santoso & Susanto (2025), who observed that the digital language of teenagers in Makassar serves as a symbol of group solidarity as well as a form of resistance against established social norms.

Based on this background, this study aims to understand the phenomenon of alay language not merely as a deviation, but as a form of linguistic creativity and a search for identity among Generation Z. By examining the use of this language on various social media platforms, this study aims to explore how alay functions in building identity, strengthening social bonds, and challenging the authority of standard language. This study is expected to enrich contemporary sociolinguistic discourse and provide a more inclusive understanding of how the digital generation negotiates meaning and power through language.

Literature Review

Understanding Alay Language and Its Differences from Slang

Alay language is a linguistic phenomenon that emerged from the creativity of Indonesian teenagers in the digital age. This style of language emerged alongside the development of communication technology, particularly social media and text messaging. The distinctive features of the Alay language are evident in its unique spelling: capital letters are used randomly, letters are replaced with numbers, such as “a” becoming “4” or ‘e’ becoming “3,” and there are unusual letter combinations and extensions. This pattern first became popular during the era of pay-per-character SMS, when users tried to save space while displaying the expressive style typical of young people muda (Wicaksono & Supriyono, 2021).

When compared to slang, Alay language has a different dimension. Slang functions more as a social communication tool—used to build closeness and follow social trends—while alay language emphasizes visual aesthetics and the personality of the user. It has become a way for the younger generation to express their uniqueness amid the dense flow of digital communication. In this context, Alay language is not merely a form of playing with letters, but also a reflection of young people's desire to stand out in the virtual world (Trimastuti, 2017). Research conducted by Sarira (2019) places alay language as a subcategory of slang, but with more extreme characteristics in terms of writing structure and word form deviations. While slang generally uses abbreviations or loanwords from foreign languages, such as “baper,” “nongkrong,” or “OOTD,” alay language goes further by radically changing the spelling, for example, “aQy c4p3 d3h” for “aku capek deh” (I'm tired). This form signifies a play on symbols and sounds that is not merely aesthetic, but also rich in social meaning.

Meanwhile, research by Mayrita et al. (2024) shows that slang originated from the need for fast and efficient communication on digital platforms. However, the Alay language is more oriented towards visual appearance and group identity. It has become part of online culture that

emphasizes self-expression and togetherness among virtual communities, not merely a means of communication.

Thus, Alay language can be understood as an extreme version of slang that thrives in the digital world. It combines visual, emotional, and personal elements as a form of self-expression for the younger generation. If slang serves to strengthen social relationships, then Alay language acts as a symbol of individual existence and a form of resistance against formal linguistic norms that are considered rigid and conventional.

Alay Language in the Perspective of Sociolinguistics and Digital Identity

This research is rooted in sociolinguistic perspectives and language identity theory, which view language as a reflection of culture, self-expression, and a tool for shaping social identity. Language is not only a means of communication, but also a way for individuals to show who they are in society. According to Sarah (2018), linguistic identity is formed through social and cultural interactions, where each language choice reflects the values and ideology of its users.

In the digital context, Deumert and Bock (2017) explain that linguistic creativity on social media is a form of social expression that challenges the boundaries of formal language. Language styles such as alay show how the younger generation adapts and asserts its identity in the virtual world.

Meanwhile, Khan and Jameel (2025) highlight the concept of “online micro-linguistic communities,” where distinctive language styles such as abbreviations, symbols, or mixed letters become markers of social membership and group solidarity.

The Development of the Alay Language in Indonesia

The development of Alay language in Indonesia shows a major change in the way the younger generation communicates in the digital age. Amidst the rapid globalization and development of social media, this language has become a means for Generation Z to express their identity and linguistic creativity. Through the use of letters, symbols, and unusual spellings, they have created a unique style of communication that reflects the social dynamics of the digital space.

Research conducted by Santoso & Susanto (2025) reveals that variations in Alay and prokem language serve as symbols of social identity among Makassar teenagers, who use abbreviations, puns, and acronyms as a form of familiarity and resistance to formal linguistic norms.

Research by Apyunita & Asdah (2025) also shows that on Instagram, alay language is used as a marker of social status and digital community membership. On this visual platform, language becomes a tool for self-image and a way to follow popular cultural trends. From a linguistic perspective, Abbas et al. (2025) emphasize that Alay forms still follow the patterns of the Indonesian language system, especially in terms of shortening and acronym formation, so that they remain structurally logical.

Meanwhile, Putra & Triyono (2018) explain that the Alay writing system emerged as a form of new social identity formation in the digital world and a symbol of resistance against language homogenization in the era of globalization. This phenomenon shows how the Alay language is not merely a linguistic deviation but a reflection of the creativity and adaptation of the younger generation to an increasingly digital world. On various social media platforms, Alay appears in a variety of contexts: on Facebook as an emotional expression, on Twitter and WhatsApp as a sign of community familiarity, and on Instagram as part of a digital lifestyle. Thus, Alay language can be understood as a form of linguistic innovation by Generation Z, an effort to build identity,

strengthen social relationships, and negotiate the boundaries between freedom of expression and formal linguistic norms in the era of digital communication.

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand how the Alay language is used and interpreted by Generation Z in the digital age. Data was collected through content analysis of posts on various social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and WhatsApp, as well as through a literature review of reputable national and international journals. The analysis focused on the form of writing, social function, and meaning behind the use of Alay language. The validity of the findings was strengthened by triangulating sources, comparing the results of social media observations with previous studies. This approach was chosen so that the study could describe the phenomenon of Alay language naturally as an expression of identity, creativity, and the way young people negotiate linguistic norms in the digital world.

Result and Discussion

General Forms of Alay Language on Social Media

Based on the results of research from various sources, it is known that the Alay language continues to evolve. Various social media platforms are used by Generation Z to show creativity and expression using language. On Facebook, Alay's writing style appears in statuses and comments with distinctive forms such as the omission of vowels, the replacement of letters with numbers, and the random use of upper and lower case letters. This form of writing is not merely a mistake, but a way for users to express their emotions and personal aesthetics. Research (Sari et al., 2015) shows that Alay language on Facebook serves an emotive and poetic function, becoming a means to highlight individual uniqueness and social closeness.

On Twitter (or X) and instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Discord, Alay language has a stronger social function. Forms such as “aq,” “b3t3,” and “wkwkzz” are used to signify familiarity and group identity. Its distinctive phonological and morphological patterns indicate the existence of an internal system among online communities that use it as a “social code” (Sari et al., 2015).

Meanwhile, on Instagram and TikTok, alay language has become part of digital self-image. Captions and comments such as “luvYuUu” or “hepii bgt” not only follow trends but also serve to build an expressive digital persona. Research by Aprianti et al. (2020) explains that the use of the alay writing system on visual platforms is not only a form of linguistic humor but also an expressive strategy to build an authentic self-image in the public eye.

In private spaces such as WhatsApp, Alay language is used freely to strengthen social relationships and replace nonverbal expressions. For example, “m4kasii yaaa 😞👉👉” is not just a thank you, but a form of emotional communication typical of young people.

Thus, each platform presents its own linguistic space: Facebook for emotional expression, Twitter for community familiarity, and Instagram or TikTok for self-image. Alay language is not merely a deviation, but a reflection of the adaptation, creativity, and linguistic resistance of the digital generation to standard language norms. The types of social media and Alay words used are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of Social Media and Alay Language Used

Social Platform	Media	Characteristics of Alay Language Use	Examples of Commonly Used Alay Words	Main Social Functions	References
Facebook		Commonly used in statuses and comments; expressive, full of emoticons and random capitalization.	'aQy', 'cYnt4', 'b3T3', 'p0k0knY4', 'muachh']	Emotional expression and public identity.	Sari, L. P. (2015)..
Instagram		Used in captions and comments; highlights style, aesthetics, and popular trends.	'c4nt1k', 'b4ruUu', 'luvYu', 'OOTDzz', 'hepiii'	Self-image and digital lifestyle.	Mayrita, H., Sari, A. P. I., & Ernawati, Y. (2024).
TikTok		Concise, creative language, often using puns or alternative spellings to follow viral audio.	['gaskeun', 'mantull', 'p4p dulu', 'capekk bgtt', 'skuyy']	Demonstrating the creativity and togetherness of the Gen Z community.	Budiasa, I. G. (2021).
Twitter/X		Short, ironic, or humorous writing style; many abbreviations and creative capitalization.	['wkwkwkz', 'b4ca dlu', 'pliss', 'anjayyy', 'ga ngertii bgt sumpahh']	Sarcasm, jokes, and spontaneous public opinion.	Trimastuti, W. (2017).
WhatsApp/Chat		Informal language in group conversations shows familiarity and a spontaneous style.	['okedeh', 'cmiww', 'm4kasii', 'btw yaaa', 'p4ncutt']	Demonstrating familiarity and inside humor.	Sarira, M. T. (2019).
YouTube/Comment Section		Hyperbolic language or sarcasm in comments; using unusual spelling to emphasize emotion.	['parahhh', 'anjirr', 's3dihh bgtt', 'wkwkzz', 'b4r4nggu']	Expressions of reactions to video content; forms of online community participation.	Wicaksono, A., & Supriyono, S. (2021).

The Use of Lay Language in Formal Settings

Alay language, which was once considered a casual style of speech on social media, has now spread to more serious settings such as education and work. This phenomenon signals a shift in the boundaries between formal and informal language among the younger generation.

What was once considered a mere communication trend is now proof that language is constantly evolving in line with technology, culture, and the way its users think. In the context of education, research by Hasanah et al. (2025) shows that many students now mix Alay and slang in presentations and academic writing. Although they are aware of the importance of formal language, the habit of digital communication has led to a decline in the consistent use of standard language. This shows that the influence of social media has affected the way people think and speak in academic spaces.

A similar phenomenon can also be seen in the workplace. A study by Siregar et al. (2024) notes that Generation Z brings the alay style into professional communication, such as emails or work messages. Although they still understand the formal context, they use this style of language to lighten the mood and maintain familiarity. For them, a little touch of Alay is not a form of unprofessionalism, but a way of adapting to a work environment that is now more flexible.

However, not everyone views this positively. Dina et al. (2023) argue that the prevalence of slang can erode linguistic discipline and weaken national character. Meanwhile, Isnanda & Setiawati (2019) emphasize that the greatest challenge in the digital age is maintaining the dignity of the Indonesian language in formal settings without rejecting innovations in digital communication.

Overall, the use of slang in formal settings illustrates the dilemma faced by the digital generation: the tension between freedom of expression and the obligation to uphold linguistic norms. Therefore, language education needs to be more adaptive, not only teaching rules, but also guiding creativity so that the Indonesian language remains vibrant, relevant, and dignified.

The Negative Impact of Alay Language on Standard Language Norms

The growing phenomenon of Alay language use in the digital space has had a serious impact on the sustainability of standard language norms in Indonesia. What initially emerged as a creative expression on social media is now causing concern because it is eroding the ability of the younger generation to speak Indonesian correctly and according to the rules. Research by Khoirunnisa et al. (2023) shows that students who actively use slang or colloquial language on social media experience a decline in their ability to use standard language, especially when writing scientific papers and giving presentations. They often mix informal language into academic contexts, blurring the line between formal and casual language.

Similar findings were revealed by Ahmad et al. (2022), who assessed that excessive use of slang can erode the existence of the Indonesian language. Code-mixing and morphological structure violations in the Alay language cause young speakers to lose their sensitivity to formal grammar. In fact, an international study by Wagiaty et al. (2024) in the *Journal of Sociotechnology* confirms that the alay writing system has triggered a shift in values in digital language practices, where speed and expressiveness are prioritized over accuracy and politeness.

Trimastuti (2017) also highlights that the alay language not only violates grammar but also reduces the clarity of meaning in public communication. Messages conveyed through this style are often difficult to understand outside the community, thereby disrupting the main function of language as a universal communication tool. Sarira (2019) expressed a similar view, finding that the use of Alay language among Makassar teenagers had a negative impact on spelling, phonology, and the meaning of formal language.

Overall, the uncontrolled use of the Alay language can reduce standard language skills, weaken linguistic awareness, and erode the authority of Indonesian as a symbol of national unity. Therefore, it is important to develop digital language literacy that balances freedom of expression and linguistic responsibility so that Indonesian remains alive and dynamic, while still rooted in its formal values.

Conclusion

Alay language is a linguistic phenomenon that has grown organically from the digital culture of Generation Z and has now become part of everyday communication. This language was born out of the need to express oneself freely, creatively, and quickly on social media, but on the other hand, it challenges the boundaries between formal and informal language. The widespread use of the Alay language indicates a shift in perspective toward language: it is no longer merely a tool for communication, but also a symbol of identity, social closeness, and even a form of resistance against linguistic structures that are considered rigid. However, this phenomenon also raises concerns, especially when this digital language style begins to carry over into academic and professional spaces, which can lead to a decline in linguistic discipline and sensitivity to standard language. Therefore, what is needed is not a ban, but a more adaptive approach to language literacy that is able to balance freedom of expression with linguistic responsibility. In this way, Indonesian can continue to thrive as a modern, dynamic language that is relevant to the spirit of the times without losing its roots and identity.

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