

# The Formation Processes and Functions of Slang Words Among American Youth in Casey McQuiston's *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019)

Friska Amelia Novrianti, Dyah Kristyowati, Resty Widya Kurniasari

Universitas Pakuan, Bogor, Indonesia

Email correspondence: [nfriskaamelia@gmail.com](mailto:nfriskaamelia@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

This study explores the word formation processes and social functions of slang used by American youth in *Red, White & Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and Yule's (2006) theory of morphology, 35 slang expressions were identified and 10 were analyzed in depth. The findings show that slang in the novel emerges from processes like clipping, acronyms, compounding, and derivation. These expressions not only demonstrate linguistic creativity but also convey social identity, emotional intimacy, and solidarity. This study contributes to the understanding of slang as a reflection of youth culture in contemporary literature.

**Keywords:** Function; *Red, White & Royal Blue*; Slang; Word Formation Processes.

## Introduction

Language is a dynamic tool of communication that constantly evolves with social, cultural, and technological changes. As Crystal (2019) notes, language is not a static system but an ever-evolving medium shaped by social, cultural, and technological forces. One of the most prominent forms of language variation is slang—an informal variety used by specific social groups, which reflects their identity and solidarity. Allan & Burridge (2006) state that slang introduces an expressive and personal tone in communication, while Holmes & Wilson (2022), highlight its social function in reinforcing group membership.

Linguistically, slang is formed through various morphological processes such as clipping, blending, affixation, borrowing, acronyms, and more (Yule, 2006). This perspective is further supported by Plag (2018), who emphasizes that word-formation processes like compounding, clipping, and blending demonstrate the flexibility and creativity of informal English. These processes demonstrate linguistic creativity and flexibility in expressing identity and social closeness. Beyond communication, slang also serves as a symbol of social identity among communities such as teenagers and ethnic groups, showcasing their cultural uniqueness and group

cohesion (Eble, 1996; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Tagliamonte (2017), asserts that adolescent language, especially slang, is crucial for constructing peer identity and navigating social boundaries.

Previous studies have shown that slang plays a vital role in strengthening group solidarity, such as in military communities (Daniah, 2008) and transgender communities (Rahmawati, 2012). However, there remains a gap in understanding how slang functions in other contexts, such as youth interactions or literary representation. This gap is also implied in previous studies which tend to focus on idiomatic expressions rather than slang as a reflection of youth identity in literary texts (Imaniar Putri Hidayat et al., 2021). A relevant literary work for such analysis is *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019), which features various slang forms that reflect the identity of American youth in contemporary socio-cultural contexts.

In this novel, the main character Alex Claremont-Diaz uses slang to reinforce generational identity and build emotional intimacy with other characters. McQuiston's informal language use enhances the realism of the dialogue and supports character development. Thus, slang in literature not only represents social identity but also contributes to narrative depth.

This study seeks to analyze the word formation processes of slang in *Red, White & Royal Blue* and

explain the social functions of its use. Applying Yule's (2006) theory of morphology, the study investigates the creative word-building processes and interprets the social context behind slang usage. This research aims to contribute to a better understanding of slang as a linguistic phenomenon that expands language expression while shaping identity and social dynamics in modern literature.

## Methods

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the formation processes and social functions of slang words in *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019) by Casey McQuiston. A qualitative method is appropriate as it focuses on exploring and interpreting linguistic phenomena within specific social and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2018). Complementarily, Mackey & Gass (2015) argue that qualitative research in language studies is particularly effective for exploring nuanced sociolinguistic phenomena, such as the role of informal language in social interaction. The descriptive nature of this study enables detailed explanations of the mechanisms of slang formation and their social roles as depicted in the novel. The primary goal is to explore how linguistic creativity reflected in slang usage reveals group identity and social dynamics in the narrative.

The main corpus of this research is the novel *Red, White & Royal Blue*, which contains rich representations of modern teenage language and socio-cultural themes. Data were collected using observation and note-taking techniques (Sudaryanto, 2015). The researcher thoroughly read all 421 pages of the novel to identify slang in both dialogue and narration. Each slang term was recorded along with its usage context, and dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster were used to verify their meanings.

Data analysis combined distributional and referential methods (Sudaryanto, 2015). The distributional method analyzed the morphological structures of each slang term and categorized them based on ten word formation processes defined by Yule (2006): clipping, blending, affixation, borrowing, coinage, acronyms, compounding,

backformation, conversion, and derivation. The referential method interpreted the social and cultural functions of slang by examining how these terms contributed to identity expression, group solidarity, and character development in the story. The analysis specifically focused on ten representative slang terms to ensure a sharp and focused discussion.

The results are presented informally in a narrative format rather than in tables or quantitative data, following the nature of linguistic literary studies (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This narrative presentation provides a rich and contextual understanding of how slang in *Red, White & Royal Blue* functions not only as a linguistic ornament but also as a social tool reflecting creativity, identity, and solidarity among youth communities in the novel.

## Findings and discussion

This study analyzes the slang formation processes and their social functions in Casey McQuiston's *Red, White & Royal Blue*. From the 35 identified slang items, ten representative examples were selected to illustrate diverse word formation types and linguistic functions. The analysis draws on Yule's (2006) theory of word formation, Allan & Burridge's (2006) theory of slang's social function, and sociolinguistic perspectives from Eble's (1996).

Firstly, the term *gal* is a result of the clipping process from the word *girl*. According to Yule (2006), clipping involves the reduction of a longer word by omitting one or more syllables while retaining its core meaning. In the novel, *gal* appears in the following context:

*"a lead-in for some spon-con about flats for the professional gal on the go."*  
(Chapter 1, p. 3)

The use of *gal* instead of *woman* or *girl* reflects a relaxed, informal tone characteristic of slang. Socially, the term emphasizes both gender identity and camaraderie among characters. Allan and Burridge (2006) note that such slang terms serve to mark in-group identity and establish intimacy. In this context, *gal* conveys a youthful, energetic

connotation and suggests solidarity among women in professional settings.

Secondly, the term *WaPo* is an acronym formed from *The Washington Post*, exemplifying the acronym formation process as outlined by Yule (2006), wherein initial letters of a phrase are combined to create a new lexical item. In the novel, the term is used as follows:

*"I saw it in WaPo this morning."  
(Chapter 1, p. 3)*

The acronym *WaPo* illustrates the efficiency of slang in modern communication, especially within digital and journalistic contexts. As Allan and Burridge (2006) emphasize, slang frequently arises out of a need for linguistic economy and stylistic brevity. The usage of *WaPo* also signifies generational familiarity with media culture and digital shorthand, aligning the character with contemporary youth discourse and information networks.

The slang term *dammit* represents a clipped and fused form of the expletive phrase *damn it*. It functions as an emotional intensifier, as observed in this excerpt:

*"God fucking dammit," she says, rubbing the heel of her hand against her forehead.  
(Chapter 8, p. 171)*

Clipping here serves to produce a more phonetically compact and emotionally charged expression. Eble (1996) points out that slang often carries affective weight, functioning as a verbal outlet for frustration, anger, or surprise. In this case, *dammit* not only signals the speaker's emotional state but also enhances the realism and immediacy of the dialogue, reinforcing character development through authentic voice.

The term *bet* is a result of the conversion process, which involves a change in word class without any change in form. In standard English, *bet* functions as a verb meaning "to risk something, usually money, on the outcome of a future event." However, in modern slang usage, *bet* has shifted its function into an interjection or noun meaning "agreement" or

"confirmation of a statement." In the novel, *bet* appears in the following context:

*"Bet's a bet," Alex tells her. "We said if there was a new rumor in a month, you'd owe me fifty bucks. I take Venmo." (Chapter 1, p. 5)*

According to the Cambridge Dictionary Online, *bet* in this context is defined as "used to show agreement or to say that you are sure about something." In everyday conversation, *bet* is often used by young speakers to affirm a statement without further confirmation. Functionally, the use of *bet* creates familiarity in conversation, increases communicative efficiency, and reflects the character's social identity. It serves as a brief, informal response that reinforces closeness among characters, replacing longer expressions like "I agree with you" with something more direct and casual.

The phrase *itty-bitty* is formed through compounding, specifically a reduplicative compound of two rhyming slang variants of *little bit*. It appears in the following conversational exchange:

*"Tiny, miniature, itty-bitty, baby brother."  
"Fuck off."  
(Chapter 8, p. 166)*

The use of *itty-bitty* injects humor and playfulness into the interaction, characteristics typical of familial teasing. According to Allan and Burridge (2006), slang frequently facilitates informal, emotionally intimate exchanges. In this case, the reduplicative form not only adds to the aesthetic rhythm of the dialogue but also conveys affection and a lighthearted tone between siblings. Its function is both descriptive and socially bonding.

The adjective *filthy* originates from the base noun *filth* through the process of derivation, specifically via the addition of the suffix *-y*. While literally meaning "very dirty," the term takes on a metaphorical and erotic implication in the following context:

*"...not because he wants to do absolutely filthy things to Henry—maybe even with the apron still on—but because he loves him..."  
(Chapter 9, p. 189)*

The slang use of *filthy* blends humor and sexual innuendo to reflect intimacy and desire. Allan and Burridge (2006) assert that slang's figurative potential allows for multiple layers of meaning, often pushing the boundaries of conventional discourse. In this instance, the word enhances the narrative's emotional depth while also portraying the complex interpersonal dynamics between characters.

The term *gag* is formed through the process of conversion, which refers to a shift in part of speech without altering the word's form. Originally a noun meaning "a thing put in or over someone's mouth to prevent them from speaking," *gag* is used here as a verb meaning "to retch or feel like vomiting." In the novel, it is used as follows:

*Alex rolls his eyes, suddenly imagining twirling around a ballroom while Henry drones sweet nothings about croquet and fox hunting in his ear. The thought makes him want to gag. (Chapter 1, p. 8)*

According to the Cambridge Dictionary Online, *gag* as a verb means "to experience the reflex of vomiting." Socially, the use of *gag* reflects a relaxed and spontaneous tone common in modern informal language. It also reinforces solidarity by conveying shared disgust or emotional response in a humorous or exaggerated way. As Allan and Burridge (2006) argue, slang often promotes linguistic creativity; the transformation of *gag* from noun to verb demonstrates how slang adapts language for expressive and emotional contexts.

The term *gush* also undergoes conversion, wherein a noun transforms into a verb without morphological alteration. While *gush* as a noun refers to "a sudden, rapid flow," in its slang verb form, it means "to express feelings enthusiastically or excessively." This usage appears in the following line from the novel:

*You will smile and nod and not piss off anyone while you and Henry spend the weekend doing charity appearances and talking to the press about how much you love each other's company. If somebody asks*

*about him, I want to hear you gush like he's your fucking prom date. (Chapter 2, p. 18)*

As stated by the Cambridge Dictionary Online, *gush* means "to express a positive feeling, especially praise, in such a strong way that it does not sound sincere." Functionally, *gush* enhances communication efficiency by packing an emotional reaction into a single, vivid verb. It also highlights linguistic creativity, turning a static noun into a dynamic expression of excessive enthusiasm, often in a sarcastic or humorous tone suited to casual, expressive dialogue.

The term *wonk* is formed through the process of borrowing, which involves the adoption of a word from another language or dialect. *Wonk* is a term in American English slang that refers to someone highly knowledgeable or obsessed with details in a specific field, especially in politics or policy. In the novel, *wonk* is used in this context:

*"Mom . . ." June starts.  
"What positions?" Alex interjects.  
She pauses, drifts back over to her slice of pizza. "Alex, you're the family wonk," she says, taking a bite. (Chapter 3, p. 49)*

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, *wonk* is defined as "a person preoccupied with arcane details or procedures in a specialized field." The use of *wonk* in this context identifies Alex as the intellectual within the family, someone involved in academic or political detail. Socially, the term encapsulates a complex idea into a concise, informal label, reflecting efficiency in language and underlining character identity and group dynamics.

The term *fruity* is derived through the process of derivation, where the base word *fruit* is modified by the suffix *-y* to create an adjective meaning "resembling or characteristic of fruit." However, in slang usage, *fruity* has developed into a term with connotations of being overly dramatic, flamboyant, or effeminate. In the novel, it appears in the following context:

*In the end they picked Dickens, which is hilarious. They wanted something less fruity than the truth, but truly, what is gayer than a*



*woman who languishes away in a crumbling mansion wearing her wedding gown every day of her life, for the drama? (Chapter 8, p. 151)*

While *fruity* literally means “smelling or tasting of fruit,” the slang meaning—according to Cambridge Dictionary—carries an implication of something exaggerated, theatrical, or affectedly refined. Functionally, *fruity* enhances descriptive power in a humorous and ironic tone, reflecting the character’s playful critique. The term also underscores how slang enriches narrative voice by infusing language with cultural nuance and expressive flair.

The analysis reveals a range of morphological processes including clipping, acronyms, compounding, and derivation. According to Yule (2006), such morphological creativity is a hallmark of informal language, enabling users to compress meaning, increase expressiveness, and reflect identity. Slang also often incorporates metaphorical meanings to enrich emotional and social nuances in communication.

The social functions of slang in *Red, White & Royal Blue* encompass four key aspects: social identity, group solidarity, emotional expression, and linguistic creativity. In line with Allan and Burridge (2006), slang acts as a symbol of group membership, differentiating insiders from outsiders, while Eble (1996) emphasizes its role in strengthening interpersonal bonds. Although this study focuses on slang, it is worth noting that other informal expressions, such as idioms, often serve similar functions in language.

As highlighted by Imaniar Putri Hidayat et al. (2021), idioms like *on the back foot* are used “to avoid unpleasant words” (p. 44), reflecting how informal language can soften discourse and enhance relatability. They further argue that expressions like *think outside the box* demonstrate linguistic creativity “to express ideas that are original, creative, or innovative” (p. 45). These insights support the idea that informal language—including slang—plays a vital role in constructing identity and fostering solidarity in contemporary discourse.

This analysis demonstrates that slang in *Red, White & Royal Blue* is not merely an informal linguistic feature, but a reflection of social dynamics,

group identity, and linguistic creativity. The ten selected examples showcase diverse forms and functions of slang, offering insight into how language operates within modern literary contexts. This study affirms that slang is a significant linguistic phenomenon worthy of deeper exploration in the representation of social and cultural identities in contemporary literature.

Recent scholarship has also emphasized how slang in digital and literary contexts functions as a medium of youth expression and social negotiation. Androutsopoulos (2022), highlights that the informal language used by young people, including slang, not only reflects identity but also mediates social belonging in both online interactions and fictional narratives. This supports the notion that slang is a dynamic linguistic tool deeply embedded in contemporary youth culture, both in real-life communication and in literary representations.

## Conclusion

This research has examined the morphological processes and social functions of slang used by American youth characters in *Red, White & Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston. The findings reveal that slang in the novel is formed through creative linguistic processes such as clipping, compounding, derivation, acronyms, conversion, and borrowing (Yule, 2006), which enrich character language and express identity, emotion, and intimacy. Consistent with Allan & Burridge (2006) and Eble (1996), the results show that slang serves vital social functions, including shaping identity, fostering solidarity, and displaying linguistic innovation as part of generational culture. This implies that slang operates not merely as informal speech but as socio-cultural code reflecting contemporary youth dynamics. Moreover, analyzing slang in literary works contributes to understanding how language mirrors modern identity construction and social relationships, affirming literature as a medium that captures the authenticity and diversity of youth discourse in contemporary contexts.

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