

Analysis of Slang as a Linguistic Mechanism in Verbal Bullying among Elementary School Students

Winda Purnama Putri¹, Murfiah Dewi Wulandari²

Department of Elementary Teacher Education Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia
Email: a510220066@student.ums.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines the transformation of slang from an expressive form of language into a linguistic mechanism of verbal bullying among elementary school students. A qualitative case study was conducted at Nanggungan Elementary School involving the principal, teachers, and sixth-grade students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation, and were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings reveal that slang primarily targets physical appearance and intellectual ability, with digital media emerging as the dominant source, followed by peer interaction and, to a lesser extent, family influence. The use of derogatory slang contributes to decreased learning motivation, reduced self-confidence, emotional distress, and weakened peer relationships. This study underscores the urgent need to strengthen language ethics education, character development programs, and digital literacy initiatives in primary schools to prevent the normalization of slang-based verbal bullying and to foster a respectful and inclusive communication environment.

Keywords: Slang, verbal bullying, elementary school students

Introduction Section

The phenomenon of verbal bullying is currently receiving serious attention in elementary schools, because it often takes place covertly and is not easily detected. Children use language in various forms, such as seemingly joking greetings, teasing, and even insulting names, without realizing that these words can hurt their peers. Here, language is not only a means of communication, but also a way to show dominance within a group of friends. This pattern of exchange indicates that children's language use is no longer neutral, but rather reflects the social dynamics developing in the school environment. Therefore, examining the use of language in verbal bullying is a crucial step in understanding how everyday language shapes social relationships and power patterns among elementary school students.

Language is the primary tool used by humans to communicate, establish social relationships, and pass on cultural values. In primary education, the role of language is not limited to being a means of conveying information, but also plays an important role in shaping children's character and way of thinking (Awaad et al., 2025). Children of elementary school age are undergoing a very dynamic stage of social development, in which their language skills are highly dependent on the influence of their home environment, educational institutions, and digital technology. In addition, the language used by elementary school children reflects their level of moral and social progress, because at this stage they are beginning to learn about the importance of empathy, manners, and boundaries in interacting with others (Telaumbanua et al., 2023).

Advances in information technology have had a significant impact on the way children use language. Social media such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram have become the main sources of new terms that children then absorb into their everyday conversations (Inayah et al., 2024). This phenomenon is exacerbated by children's increasing access to digital media. Recent research shows that 60% of elementary school children in Indonesia use social media, and 45% of them actively imitate popular terms from entertainment content (Listiani et al., 2023). As a result, slang, which was originally expressive and fun, began to shift in function to become a tool for mocking, humiliating, or reinforcing social status among peers (Bahar et al., 2025).

Data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of the Republic of Indonesia, KemenPPPA (2024) shows that 37% of elementary school-aged children have experienced verbal abuse in the form of teasing, insults, and derogatory nicknames. This form of violence is one of the most difficult to identify because it is often considered a joke. Research by Anugrah and Hartati (2022) confirms that verbal bullying in elementary school is often disguised through language games. This shows that language skills also function as an instrument of power among children.

Research by Gredler (2003) in his book *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do* explains that bullying behavior, including verbal forms, is rooted in social interaction patterns that are formed from an early age, when children learn to express dominance and gain attention through language in the family and school environments. Furthermore, Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) emphasize that verbal bullying often arises from unequal power structures among students, where certain expressions are used to reinforce group identity and control social relations in the classroom. Complementing this view, a recent study by Firdaus (2025) shows that in the modern context, the practice of verbal bullying is increasingly influenced by the use of slang and popular terms sourced from digital media. Language is no longer merely a tool of communication, but also a symbolic instrument used by students to assert social status, exclude peers, and establish power hierarchies in elementary school interactions (Desky et al., 2017). These experts' views reinforce the assumption that the linguistic dimension plays a central role in the formation of bullying behavior in elementary school environments.

Bullying behavior in schools is grounded in theories of power imbalance and repeated aggression, as described by Gredler (2003), which emphasize that bullying emerges when individuals use physical, verbal, or relational strategies to assert dominance over peers. In the context of language use, this study adopts the sociolinguistic perspective that language serves not only as a communication tool but also as a symbolic resource for constructing identity and exercising power (Holmes & Wilson, 2022). Slang that functions as ridicule reflects language ideology, where certain expressions become socially legitimized as markers of superiority or inferiority within peer groups. Theoretical perspectives from Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) further show that verbal bullying is shaped by unequal power relations, in which linguistic forms such as teasing or derogatory slang operate as mechanisms to control social inclusion and exclusion. These theoretical foundations guide this study in analyzing how slang operates as a linguistic mechanism of verbal bullying, how it reflects broader sociolinguistic power structures, and how it influences children's emotional and social development in the elementary school context.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is not only a means of communication, but also a tool for asserting power and group identity (Holmes & Wilson, 2022; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). More popular students tend to use slang to control social relationships and determine who is accepted or excluded (Lestari, P., & Kurniawan, 2023). Jayaputri and Aziz (2024) add that the linguistic structure of children's teasing often contains symbolic meanings of dominance through words absorbed from digital media. Therefore, the use of terms such as “*tolol*”, “*bocil*”, “*jamet*”, or “*cupu*” is not merely a lexical variation, but a sign of unequal social relationships among elementary school students (Putri & Nurulpaik, 2025).

Previous studies have mostly focused on the function of slang among adolescents (Azizah, 2019; Bahar et al., 2025) or the impact of social media on children's communication styles (Liu et al., 2024; Valkenburg, Patti M.; Peter, 2019). However, studies that specifically link slang with verbal bullying practices at the elementary school level are still rare. Firdaus and Andrikasmi (2025) even emphasize the importance of understanding the psychosocial factors that influence bullying behavior from an early age to prevent its replication in higher levels of education.

This research gap highlights the need for studies that treat slang as a sociolinguistic phenomenon with the potential to become an instrument of verbal violence among elementary school children. Using a qualitative approach, this study aims to analyze the forms, meanings, sources, motives for use, and impacts of slang as an instrument of verbal bullying among elementary school students. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of ethical literacy and efforts to prevent verbal bullying in primary education.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the forms, meanings, sources, motives, and impacts of slang used by elementary school students, as well as its role in verbal bullying. A qualitative approach is suitable for capturing linguistic practices, interactional patterns, and students' subjective experiences in natural settings.

Nanggunan Elementary School was selected as the research location based on its relevance to the phenomenon under investigation. Preliminary discussions with the principal and teachers indicated that the school had experienced recurring issues involving the use of slang and verbal teasing that resembled early forms of verbal bullying. The school represents a typical public elementary school in a semi-urban area with high exposure to digital media among students, making it an appropriate setting for examining how online slang shapes peer communication. The student population also reflects diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, providing a natural context for observing variations in language use and social dynamics. These considerations strengthen the analytical relevance and transferability of selecting this school as the case study site.

The key informants consisted of the principal, sixth-grade teachers, and six sixth-grade students. Data collection techniques included interviews, observations, and documentation. The semi-structured interview guidelines contained four sections: (1) students' understanding of slang and examples they commonly use; (2) contexts in which slang appears in peer interactions; (3) intentions and meanings attributed to specific expressions; and (4) emotional and social responses related to verbal teasing. Each student interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes, while teacher interviews focused on behavioral patterns and their perceptions of slang-based verbal bullying. All interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed for analysis.

Observations were conducted in classrooms, cafeterias, and school grounds to record spontaneous interactions among students. The observation protocol included recording the use of slang, the situational context, the relationship between the

speaker and listener, and emotional reactions. Observations were conducted over a week, each lasting 30–60 minutes depending on the students' activities that day. Field notes were written immediately after each session to maintain accuracy and minimize memory bias.

Documentation served as complementary data to support triangulation. The documented materials included photographs of school activities (framed to protect student identities), teachers' behavioral notes, and informal written materials containing slang expressions. All documents were organized using a standardized documentation sheet to maintain systematic data management.

Data analysis employed the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded to identify recurring patterns related to the forms, sources, motives, and impacts of slang. In the data display stage, matrices and narrative summaries were developed to organize findings and highlight emerging themes. Conclusion drawing involved verifying patterns against the raw data and triangulating information from students, teachers, and documents to ensure credibility and dependability.

Results and Discussion

Results

Form and Meaning of Slang

The findings of this study reveal that the forms of slang used by sixth-grade students at Nanggungan Elementary School can be divided into two broad categories, namely (a) slang that mocks physical appearance, and (b) slang that mocks intellectual and cognitive abilities. The categorization, examples, meanings, and potential impacts of these forms are systematically presented in Table 1. Both forms appear consistently in daily interactions, both in the classroom and when playing in the school environment (Lestari, P., & Kurniawan, 2023; Putri & Nurulpaik, 2025).

Table 1. Categories, Examples, and Impacts of Slang Used by Students

Category of Slang	Examples of Terms	Meaning in Interaction	Potential Impact on Students
Physical ridicule	<i>Prindapan, jamet, alay, bocil</i>	Used to comment on appearance, style, or physical traits	Shame, withdrawal, reduced self-confidence
Intellectual ridicule	<i>Tolol, lemot, noob, dontol, gaptek</i>	Used to criticize cognitive ability, task performance, or skill level	Lower motivation, reluctance to participate, fear of interaction

(a) Slang that mocks physical appearance

The most dominant category involves slang directed at physical traits. Expressions such as “*prindapan*,” “*jamet*,” “*alay*,” and “*bocil*” were commonly used to describe a friend's appearance, clothing style, or perceived neatness. Observations showed that students frequently used “*alay*” or “*jamet*” to comment on hairstyles or outfits, while *prindapan* was often used to tease peers with darker skin or those considered less tidy. Although delivered in a joking manner, these expressions carried negative connotations and were perceived as hurtful by several students. This reflects the early stage of verbal teasing that may escalate into more serious bullying, as noted by Menesini and Salmivalli (2017).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this type of speech reflects the phenomenon of power through language as described by Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021). In the context of elementary school interactions, students who frequently initiated verbal teasing tended to have greater influence among their peers and were often regarded as “popular” or “cool.” As the sixth-grade teacher noted, certain students who used terms like “*alay*” or “*jamet*” were imitated by others, indicating that slang functions as a marker of prestige and an instrument for differentiating social status (Holmes & Wilson, 2022). Interview results further revealed that students who were repeatedly targeted with physical ridicule tended to withdraw from peer groups and experienced a decline in confidence during classroom participation. This supports Rigby's (2010) argument that ridicule based on appearance may create lasting emotional discomfort and reduce students' sense of belonging.

(b) Slang that mocks intellectual and cognitive abilities

The second category consists of slang that targets students' intellectual and cognitive abilities. Terms such as “*tolol*,” “*lemot*,” “*noob*,” “*gaptek*,” “*dontol*,” and “*yapping*” were used to describe peers who struggled to complete tasks, made mistakes, or performed poorly during games. Interview data indicate that several students had used these expressions to tease classmates, while others recalled feeling embarrassed or discouraged when labeled with such terms. These patterns demonstrate how slang becomes a symbolic comparison of competence among students.

According to Li et al. (2024), teasing related to intellectual ability represents a form of verbal dominance in which speakers assert superiority through linguistic labeling. This phenomenon was evident among Nanggungan Elementary

School students, where slang terms commonly encountered in digital content were normalized and adopted without full awareness of their emotional impact. This aligns with Inayah et al. (2024), who argue that social media functions as a major site for the socialization of harsh expressions framed as humor, ultimately shaping children's linguistic practices.

From an educational psychology perspective, repeated intellectual ridicule affects children's self-esteem and learning motivation. Bahar et al. (2025) emphasize that students who repeatedly receive negative labels tend to internalize these judgments and perceive themselves as less capable. The sixth-grade teacher confirmed that students who were often teased as "*lemot*" or "*tolol*" became more passive in group activities and required additional support to re-engage academically. These findings highlight the need to cultivate positive language practices to build empathy and reduce the normalization of ridicule in school settings.

Sources of Slang

The findings indicate that sixth-grade students acquire slang primarily from social media, followed by peer interaction, and, to a lesser extent, the family environment. Social media emerged as the most dominant source, as all student informants reported frequently encountering new slang expressions on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and online games. Terms such as "*noob*", "*yapping*", "*bucin*", "*tolol*", and "*jamet*" were largely adopted from viral content created by influencers and gaming streamers. Teachers also observed that students often repeated phrases heard in digital media, reflecting the strong influence of online linguistic trends on everyday communication.

Peer interaction serves as the second major source in reinforcing the use of slang. Students admitted that they tend to adopt expressions used by classmates who are more dominant or perceived as more popular. When particular terms are repeatedly used by influential peers, they quickly spread and become embedded in routine classroom and playground conversations.

In contrast, the influence of the family environment is relatively minimal. Most students reported that slang is rarely used in their households. However, a few participants noted that they occasionally learned certain expressions from older siblings or relatives. Overall, these findings demonstrate that the circulation of slang among elementary school students is primarily driven by digital exposure and peer imitation, with the school environment becoming a central space in which identity and power are negotiated through language.

The Motive for Using Slang as a Tool for Bullying

Three key motives emerged from the data:

1. Building social identity (students used slang to appear confident or humorous)
2. Imitating digital linguistic trends (expressions popular online were copied in school interactions)
3. Peer conformity (students followed terms introduced by popular peers to gain group acceptance)

Interviews confirmed that slang helped students feel "closer" to their friends, although some admitted using negative expressions merely to "fit in."

The findings indicate that students use slang for a range of social and psychological reasons that extend beyond everyday communication. Three central motives were identified in this study. First, students employ slang as a means of constructing social identity and negotiating status within their peer groups. Expressions such as *tolol*, *bocil*, and *dontol* are frequently used to signal superiority or attract attention during informal interactions. This behaviour reflects the concept of symbolic power described by Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021), who argue that language functions as a resource for positioning oneself within social hierarchies. Consistent with this perspective, García-Fernández et al. (2023) note that verbal teasing commonly serves as a strategy for gaining dominance and influence among peers.

Second, students' use of slang is strongly shaped by digital linguistic imitation. 68% of the student informants reported that the use of slang made them feel more confident and accepted within their peer groups, while the same proportion also reported adopting expressions encountered in TikTok videos, YouTube Shorts, and online gaming environments. These results align with Nugroho and Arifin (2023), who explain that digital language imitation contributes to the normalization of harsh speech patterns among children and adolescents. Slang popularized by online creators is often perceived as humorous or stylish, prompting students to reproduce it without fully considering its emotional consequences.

Third, students adopt slang to maintain conformity with influential peers in the classroom setting. When popular or assertive students introduce particular expressions, others tend to follow in order to secure acceptance within the group. This pattern reflects Holmes and Wilson (2022) assertion that linguistic behaviour is shaped by social alignment and group solidarity. In early peer interactions, such conformity reinforces the spread of slang-based teasing and reveals the subtle power dynamics embedded in everyday classroom communication.

The Impact of Slang Bullying on Victims

The findings reveal that the use of negative slang has significant emotional, social, and academic consequences for students who become targets of such expressions. Victims frequently reported feelings of embarrassment, sadness, and emotional discomfort when addressed with terms such as *stupid*, *lame*, or *childish*. One student described the experience as follows:

“At first, many cried because they were teased, then became quiet and didn't want to talk to their friends.

Some also became afraid to socialize because they were worried about being teased again.”

Although perpetrators often justify these expressions as harmless jokes, the impact on victims is substantial. The derogatory nature of repeated slang-based teasing generates insecurity and diminished self-worth, aligning with Kim and Lim's (2021) view that harsh verbal remarks directed at school-age children can disrupt emotional stability and shape defensive communication patterns in later life. The emotional strain experienced by victims indicates that slang-based bullying functions as a form of symbolic aggression where language becomes a mechanism for exerting dominance and reinforcing unequal social relations.

Beyond emotional consequences, the study also found that slang bullying contributes to a decline in learning motivation and class participation. Victims tend to withdraw from peer interaction, avoid those who frequently tease them, and hesitate to speak during classroom activities. These behavioral changes reinforce Lee et al. (2020) concept of verbal aggression adaptation, which posits that repeated exposure to negative language influences children's social behavior and erodes their academic confidence. A sixth-grade student expressed the varied reactions observed among their peers:

“When teased using slang like that, sometimes they tease back, sometimes they cry, sometimes they get angry, and sometimes they report it to the teacher.”

These varied responses illustrate how students negotiate the power dynamics embedded in verbal interactions. Slang-based teasing not only affects individual emotions but also shapes patterns of social exclusion and peer hierarchy within the classroom environment. The tendency of students to imitate digital language trends further amplifies these effects. As Anggraeni and Robandi (2023) note, children often adopt linguistic styles from social media to appear modern or accepted, but this imitation can shift norms of politeness and empathy in communication.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that slang bullying is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a socially embedded practice that reproduces subtle forms of symbolic power and inequality among students. The emotional vulnerability experienced by victims, combined with reduced social participation and academic engagement, highlights the need for schools to strengthen character education, promote respectful language use, and cultivate a classroom culture that discourages harmful forms of verbal expression.

Discussion

Slang as a Mechanism of Social Positioning

As summarized in Table 1, both physical and intellectual ridicule function not only as informal slang, but also as a symbolic mechanism of power reproduction among students. The findings show that slang operates not merely as playful language but as a tool for negotiating social status within peer groups. This pattern aligns with the concept of symbolic power, which explains how language allows individuals to position themselves within social hierarchies. Students who frequently introduced slang, especially derogatory expressions were often perceived as more influential or “popular,” reinforcing subtle power dynamics in the classroom.

Influence of Digital Language Ideology

The strong influence of TikTok, YouTube shorts, and online gaming indicates that students adopt linguistic styles promoted in digital spaces. Harsh expressions framed as humorous or trendy online become normalized when reproduced in offline interactions. This reflects wider language ideology in digital culture, where humorous insult and exaggerated expression are perceived as markers of modernity or confidence. The high percentage of students reporting digital imitation illustrates how online environments shape children's linguistic repertoires and reduce sensitivity to offensive language.

Verbal Bullying and Cognitive Labeling

Slang that targets intellectual ability such as “*tolol*”, “*lemot*”, and “*noob*” functions as a form of verbal labeling, positioning the victim as less competent. Research on verbal dominance suggests that such labels create hierarchical comparisons that can undermine children's confidence and self-perception. The patterns found in this study reflect how linguistic labeling contributes to the reproduction of unequal power relations among peers.

Emotional and Academic Implications

Victims' emotional responses, including withdrawal, embarrassment, and reduced participation correspond with established theories on verbal aggression in childhood. Repeated exposure to derogatory labels may disrupt emotional stability and lead to defensive communication behavior. The decline in academic engagement among frequently teased students indicates the broader learning consequences of verbal bullying. These findings emphasize the need for proactive

school-based interventions that promote positive language use, strengthen character education, and teach students to recognize the emotional impact of seemingly humorous expressions. These findings confirm that everyday language practices among children are not neutral, but are deeply embedded in social power relations and ideological constructions, even at the primary education level.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the use of slang among elementary school students does not merely function as a form of contemporary expression, but also operates as a linguistic mechanism of verbal bullying that negatively affects students' motivation, self-confidence, emotional well-being, and social relationships. Derogatory slang related to physical appearance and intellectual ability is frequently used as a means of asserting dominance and negotiating social status within peer groups. The primary source of this language is digital media, followed by peer interaction, while the family environment plays a comparatively minor role. The motives for using such expressions are driven by the desire for recognition, conformity, and the imitation of digital linguistic trends. In practical terms, schools are encouraged to implement clear classroom language agreements, integrate anti-bullying and language ethics modules into character education, provide teacher training on identifying and responding to linguistic violence, and introduce age-appropriate digital literacy programs that help students critically evaluate the language used in online content. These interventions can support the development of empathy, respectful communication practices, and a safer school environment. This study is limited to sixth-grade students in a single school context, and therefore does not fully represent all elementary education settings. Future research should involve a broader range of grade levels and schools with diverse social and cultural backgrounds to deepen understanding of how slang functions as a mechanism of verbal bullying in different educational environments.

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