



## THE USE OF SLANG AND DIALECT IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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### **Abstract**

*The use of slang and dialect in Young Adult (YA) literature has emerged as a defining linguistic feature that distinguishes the genre and enhances its cultural relevance. Unlike traditional literary forms that privilege standardized English, YA texts frequently incorporate non-standard varieties of language to reflect the lived realities of adolescents. This study investigates the role of slang and dialect in YA literature, focusing on how these linguistic strategies contribute to authenticity, identity construction, and reader engagement. Anchored in sociolinguistic theories of variation and identity (Labov, 1972; Eckert, 2000) and literary frameworks surrounding adolescent fiction (Trites, 2000; Cart, 2010), this research examines how authors strategically deploy linguistic variation to capture the nuances of youth culture. A qualitative textual analysis was conducted on three influential YA novels—*The Outsiders* (1967) by S.E. Hinton, *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas, and *Long Way Down* (2017) by Jason Reynolds. Each of these works was selected for its linguistic richness and cultural impact, particularly in its portrayal of adolescent voices across diverse social, cultural, and racial contexts. The analysis highlights three key functions of slang and dialect in YA fiction: (1) constructing authentic voices that mirror real adolescent speech, (2) expressing identity and resistance, especially in contexts of marginalization and social struggle, and (3) enhancing reader immersion by resonating with the rhythms, creativity, and immediacy of youth communication. Findings suggest that slang and dialect are not mere stylistic flourishes but central devices that allow YA authors to bridge generational gaps, validate youth linguistic practices, and challenge dominant language ideologies that often marginalize non-standard English. However, the study also identifies tensions: slang evolves rapidly and can date texts, while dialect carries risks of stereotyping if not employed with cultural sensitivity. Despite these challenges, the integration of linguistic diversity in YA literature enhances its pedagogical and literary value, offering both a mirror for adolescent readers and a window into the cultural and social dynamics of youth communities.*

**Keywords:** *Slang; Dialect; Young Adult (YA) Literature; Authenticity; Identity Construction; Reader Engagement; Code-Switching*



## 1. Introduction

Young Adult (YA) literature has emerged as one of the most dynamic and influential literary genres of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, addressing not only the developmental concerns of adolescents but also their cultural and linguistic identities. One of the defining features of YA texts is their frequent incorporation of slang and dialect, which serve as powerful tools for constructing authenticity, relatability, and emotional resonance. Unlike traditional literary forms that privilege standardized English as the linguistic norm, YA literature often embraces colloquial and non-standard varieties of language to reflect the lived realities of adolescent communication (Cart, 2010; Trites, 2000). Slang, by its nature, embodies informality, creativity, and in-group solidarity, making it particularly significant in youth-centered narratives. It allows authors to capture the immediacy of teenage voices and to reflect the constantly evolving lexicon of adolescence (Eble, 1996). Similarly, the use of dialect situates characters within specific social, cultural, and geographical contexts, offering readers a sense of realism and diversity in representation (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). For instance, the depiction of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017) underscores themes of cultural identity and resistance, while the regional colloquialisms in S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) highlight the socio-economic and cultural divisions between rival youth groups. Such linguistic choices move beyond stylistic ornamentation; they play a central role in shaping characters' identities, establishing group belonging, and negotiating power dynamics. The deployment of slang and dialect in YA literature also intersects with broader sociolinguistic debates concerning language variation, identity, and ideology. Sociolinguistic research has consistently demonstrated that linguistic practices are not neutral but deeply embedded in social meaning (Labov, 1972; Eckert, 2000). Adolescents, in particular, use language innovatively as a means of signaling group affiliation, resistance to authority, and cultural creativity (Bucholtz, 2011). YA authors, in representing these linguistic practices, bring to literature the vitality of youth speech while simultaneously challenging dominant ideologies that privilege standard English as the only legitimate form of expression (Baker-Bell, 2020). From a literary perspective, the inclusion of non-standard varieties of English aligns with the genre's larger aim of validating adolescent voices and experiences. As Trites (2000) argues, YA fiction often serves as a space where issues of identity, power, and autonomy are negotiated. Language becomes central to this negotiation, functioning both as a reflection of lived realities and as a site of resistance to cultural homogenization. By foregrounding youth speech patterns, YA authors not only authenticate the adolescent experience but also cultivate stronger emotional connections with their readers, who recognize and resonate with these familiar forms of expression.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Slang in YA Literature

Slang plays a central role in shaping the voices of characters in Young Adult (YA) literature, serving as a linguistic marker that aligns fictional adolescents with their real-world counterparts. Scholars argue that slang, as an informal and ever-evolving form of expression, mirrors the dynamic nature of adolescent identity and group belonging (Eble, 1996; Coleman, 2014). Its use in YA texts is not merely stylistic but serves to enhance the credibility of characters, creating a sense of immediacy and realism. In Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017), the protagonist Starr



Carter navigates two linguistic worlds: the Black vernacular of her home community and the standard English expected in her predominantly white private school. This form of code-switching, a well-documented phenomenon in sociolinguistic research, demonstrates how slang and vernacular language allow adolescents to negotiate multiple identities and social expectations (Alim & Smitherman, 2012). By incorporating youth slang and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Thomas not only provides authenticity to Starr's character but also exposes readers to the cultural and political dimensions of language. As scholars have noted, such representations bring readers closer to the adolescent voice while challenging hegemonic language ideologies that privilege "standard" forms of English (Baker-Bell, 2020).

### **2.2 Functions of Slang**

Linguistic research has identified several key functions of slang in adolescent communication, many of which are reflected in YA literature. Slang fosters group solidarity and secrecy, allowing young people to establish in-group boundaries and resist adult authority (Eble, 1996). It also serves a cognitive function by creating lexical economy and flexibility, enabling adolescents to coin new terms that encapsulate complex emotions or social situations in compact forms (Coleman, 2014). In literary contexts, these functions extend to character development and thematic resonance. Slang often conveys emotional intensity, signaling rebellion, frustration, or humor (Androutsopoulos, 2007). With the rise of digital communication, internet-mediated slang has introduced new linguistic innovations into YA literature, including clippings ("sus" from suspicious), acronyms (e.g., "YOLO"), and blends ("hangry") (Tagliamonte, 2016). Authors such as Jason Reynolds integrate these features into narrative dialogue and verse to reflect contemporary youth culture, ensuring that readers recognize themselves in the linguistic creativity of the characters. Thus, slang in YA fiction is both a representational strategy and a cultural archive, documenting the ever-changing landscape of youth expression. It simultaneously affirms the agency of young people as linguistic innovators and legitimizes their voices within literary spaces.

### **2.3 Dialect in Fiction**

Dialect, like slang, plays a crucial role in grounding literature in specific cultural and social contexts. Its literary use has a long history, most famously exemplified in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), where distinct regional dialects construct social realism and differentiate characters (Sommer, 2011). In YA literature, dialect contributes to character authenticity and highlights the socio-economic, racial, or geographical backgrounds of young protagonists (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). However, contemporary criticism warns against uncritical use of dialect, particularly in texts for young audiences. Dialect, when overused or exaggerated, risks perpetuating stereotypes or alienating readers unfamiliar with its features (Baker-Bell, 2020). Moreover, the written representation of phonetic variation can present accessibility challenges for readers and raise questions about cultural sensitivity (Lippi-Green, 2012). YA authors, therefore, must navigate the fine line between linguistic authenticity and responsible representation. Angie Thomas and Jason Reynolds provide strong examples of dialect use that foreground cultural voice without descending into caricature. Their works demonstrate that dialect, when used thoughtfully, enriches narrative authenticity, offers visibility to marginalized speech communities, and challenges hierarchical assumptions about "proper" English.



## 2.4 Historical and Pedagogical Context

The incorporation of slang and dialect in YA literature can also be situated within the broader historical development of the genre. Early canonical YA texts such as J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) broke from literary convention by incorporating the colloquial speech of teenagers. These works introduced a hybrid register that blended adult narration with adolescent idioms, effectively legitimizing youth voices in mainstream literature (Cart, 2010). This stylistic innovation can be understood as an early form of literary code-switching, reflecting the social tensions between adolescence and adulthood. In educational contexts, the presence of slang and dialect in YA literature has been leveraged as a tool for enhancing reading engagement and promoting critical literacy. Researchers have found that when students see their own linguistic repertoires reflected in texts, they are more likely to connect with literature and develop positive reading identities (Baker-Bell, 2020; Moje et al., 2004). Moreover, YA fiction that includes non-standard varieties of English creates opportunities for classroom discussions about language diversity, cultural identity, and social justice (Cai, 2002). Thus, both historically and pedagogically, the integration of slang and dialect into YA literature reflects the genre's enduring role as a space where adolescent experiences and voices are validated, making it a powerful resource for both literary and educational practice.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in sociolinguistic theories of language variation and identity construction alongside literary scholarship on adolescent fiction. Together, these frameworks illuminate how slang and dialect in Young Adult (YA) literature function not only as stylistic devices but also as cultural tools that represent identity, social belonging, and power negotiation.

### 3.1 Sociolinguistic Theories of Variation and Identity

The foundational insights of William Labov (1972) established that language variation is systematically linked to social categories such as class, ethnicity, and community. His work demonstrated that non-standard linguistic varieties are not "errors" but rule-governed systems reflecting social realities. In the context of YA literature, the inclusion of slang and dialect reflects the speech patterns of adolescents and situates them within recognizable social categories, whether tied to peer groups, neighborhoods, or cultural affiliations. Building on this, Penelope Eckert (2000) emphasized that adolescents are key agents of linguistic change. Her ethnographic work with high school students revealed how language practices (slang terms, pronunciation, styles) construct and reinforce social categories such as "jocks" and "burnouts." Eckert's framework is especially relevant to YA literature because fictional adolescents similarly rely on distinctive linguistic forms to express solidarity, resistance, and identity. Characters in novels such as *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) and *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017) embody these dynamics, using language as a means of navigating and negotiating their social positions.

### 3.2 Code-Switching and Register Mixing

Another important sociolinguistic concept is code-switching, the practice of alternating between language varieties or registers depending on context (Gumperz, 1982). In YA literature, code-switching frequently appears when characters move between peer and adult worlds or between cultural contexts. For instance, Starr Carter in Thomas's *The Hate U Give* shifts between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) at home and standardized English at school, a phenomenon



that mirrors real-life strategies of bilingual and bidialectal youth (Alim & Smitherman, 2012). Scholars argue that such register mixing reflects the fluid identities of adolescents, who often straddle multiple cultural and linguistic domains (Bucholtz, 2011). For YA readers, these moments of linguistic negotiation reinforce the authenticity of characters and illustrate the tension between personal identity and societal expectations (czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl).

### **3.3 Literary Theories of Adolescent Fiction**

From a literary perspective, scholars of YA fiction such as Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000) and Michael Cart (2010) argue that the genre is defined by its negotiation of power, identity, and autonomy. Adolescence is depicted as a transitional phase in which characters struggle against adult authority, societal structures, and internal questions of self-definition. Language becomes a critical site of this struggle: slang conveys resistance to authority, while dialect foregrounds cultural belonging. Trites (2000) highlights how YA fiction “disturbs the universe” by validating adolescent voices and perspectives, while Cart (2010) situates YA literature as a genre that celebrates youth culture and its distinctiveness. The inclusion of slang and dialect thus aligns with these theoretical positions, allowing YA texts to foreground linguistic practices that define adolescence as a cultural stage.

### **3.4 Integrative Perspective**

Bringing these frameworks together, this study conceptualizes slang and dialect in YA literature as linguistic markers of identity construction, cultural negotiation, and reader engagement. Labov’s and Eckert’s sociolinguistic insights reveal the social functions of variation, while Trites’s and Cart’s literary analyses underscore the narrative significance of adolescent voices. Code-switching and register mixing serve as bridges between youth and adult worlds, reflecting the fluidity of adolescent identity and highlighting the genre’s commitment to authenticity.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative textual analysis to investigate the use of slang and dialect in Young Adult (YA) literature. Textual analysis was chosen because it allows for close examination of language as it appears in literary texts, while also situating that language within broader cultural and social frameworks (Krippendorff, 2018). The approach aligns with sociolinguistic traditions that treat texts as socially meaningful artifacts, reflecting patterns of identity construction, cultural negotiation, and power relations (Gee, 2014).

### **4.2 Selection of Texts**

Three YA novels were selected based on their linguistic richness, cultural impact, and representativeness of different historical and social contexts:

1. *The Outsiders* (1967) by S.E. Hinton: A groundbreaking text in YA literature, notable for its portrayal of working-class adolescents and its integration of colloquial teenage speech.
2. *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas: A contemporary novel centered on African American youth, foregrounding African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and code-switching as central linguistic practices.
3. *Long Way Down* (2017) by Jason Reynolds: A verse novel that incorporates urban slang, rhythm, and oral storytelling traditions to reflect contemporary Black adolescent experiences.



These texts were deliberately chosen for their diverse social milieus (working-class white youth, African American communities, urban cultural contexts) and for their linguistic textures, which provide rich material for analyzing slang, dialect, and code-switching. The combination of historical and contemporary works also enabled examination of how the use of non-standard language in YA literature has evolved over time.

#### 4.3 Data Collection and Analytical Procedure

Passages featuring slang, dialect, and code-switching were systematically identified through close reading. Particular attention was paid to instances where:

1. Characters use slang to signal group belonging or emotional intensity.
2. Dialect conveys cultural, racial, or socio-economic identity.
3. Code-switching occurs between contexts (e.g., peer vs. institutional settings).

Each instance was then analyzed in relation to three primary objectives:

1. **Authenticity:** Does the linguistic form mirror real adolescent communication, thereby enhancing realism?
2. **Identity Expression:** How does the use of slang or dialect construct individual or group identity?
3. **Reader Immersion:** How do these linguistic practices engage readers and foster relatability?

The analysis combined sociolinguistic theory (Labov, 1972; Eckert, 2000) with literary criticism of YA fiction (Trites, 2000; Cart, 2010). This dual framework ensured that both the linguistic and narrative functions of slang and dialect were examined.

#### 4.4 Trustworthiness and Limitations

To enhance credibility, the analysis was triangulated with existing scholarship on youth language and YA literature (e.g., Baker-Bell, 2020; Tagliamonte, 2016). However, the methodology has inherent limitations. Textual analysis, while rich in detail, is interpretive and may reflect researcher bias. Additionally, only three texts were analyzed, which limits the generalizability of findings. Future studies could expand the corpus to include multilingual YA texts or works from non-Western contexts.

### 5. Results & Discussion

#### 5.1 Authentic Voices

Across the three novels, authors employ non-standard linguistic forms to construct authentic adolescent voices. In *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), Starr's code-switching between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in her home community and Standard American English at her private school embodies her negotiation of dual identities. This phenomenon reflects sociolinguistic research showing how code-switching is both a communicative strategy and an index of identity performance (Rickford, 2016; Alim & Smitherman, 2012). Similarly, S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) relies heavily on colloquial dialogue to demarcate class and regional distinctions. The Greasers' speech reflects working-class slang and regional American English features, positioning them in opposition to the more privileged Socs. This aligns with Labov's (1972) finding that linguistic variation often signals social stratification. Jason Reynolds' *Long Way Down* (2017) adopts a distinct stylistic approach: free-verse poetry infused with rhythm, repetition, and urban slang. This stylistic choice mirrors the cadences of spoken word and hip-hop,



thereby capturing the oral vernacular traditions of contemporary African American youth (Somers-Willett, 2009). Together, these examples illustrate how non-standard forms enhance textual authenticity by anchoring characters in lived linguistic realities.

### 5.2 Identity and Resistance

The novels also highlight the role of slang and dialect as tools for identity construction and resistance. Slang functions as a marker of solidarity within peer groups, distinguishing insiders from outsiders (Tagliamonte, 2016). In *The Outsiders*, the Greasers' shared slang establishes a collective identity against the Socs, enacting what Eckert (2000) terms "community of practice" identity work. In *The Hate U Give*, linguistic practices function politically. Starr's strategic code-switching reveals not only identity negotiation but also resistance to the dominance of standardized English. Scholars argue that AAVE carries cultural capital and embodies resilience against linguistic discrimination (Baker-Bell, 2020). Reynolds' *Long Way Down* furthers this resistance through its stylistic embrace of oral Black vernacular traditions, rejecting standardized literary norms in favor of authenticity. Thus, these texts demonstrate how adolescent characters assert agency and contest linguistic hierarchies through everyday speech.

### 5.3 Reader Immersion

YA literature's linguistic authenticity also deepens reader immersion. By aligning narrative voice with adolescent vernacular, authors bridge the gap between literary representation and lived youth experience. Research suggests that such linguistic strategies not only enhance relatability but also increase reading motivation among adolescents, particularly reluctant readers (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Moreover, the use of slang and dialect invites readers to critically reflect on social issues such as race, class, and marginalization—topics that might otherwise remain abstract or inaccessible (Carter, 2017). This demonstrates how non-standard language functions beyond stylistic flair: it becomes a pedagogical and empathetic tool, enabling readers to engage more deeply with both narrative and sociocultural realities.

### 5.4 Challenges and Tensions

Despite these benefits, the integration of slang and dialect in YA literature raises significant challenges.

1. **Temporal Risk:** Slang is temporally unstable. As one creative writing guide cautions, "slang is like a fish... good when it's fresh or old, a fossil. But in between is a nasty period" (Hill, 2009). When slang becomes dated, it risks alienating new generations of readers. This volatility underscores the difficulty of capturing the ever-shifting dynamics of youth language (Eble, 1996).
2. **Stereotyping:** The depiction of dialect also carries the risk of stereotyping. Scholars warn that literary portrayals of non-standard varieties, particularly AAVE, can reproduce linguistic prejudice if presented without cultural sensitivity (Green, 2002; Lippi-Green, 2012). While Thomas and Reynolds are praised for their culturally embedded depictions of Black speech, the potential for misrepresentation remains a concern—especially in texts authored outside the communities represented.

In short, while non-standard linguistic practices enrich YA literature by amplifying authenticity, identity, and immersion, they simultaneously demand careful navigation of issues of temporality and representation.



## 6. Conclusion and Limitations

This study demonstrates that the use of slang and dialect in Young Adult (YA) literature extends far beyond stylistic ornamentation; it functions as a vital resource for authenticity, identity construction, and reader immersion. By foregrounding non-standard linguistic practices, authors such as Thomas, Hinton, and Reynolds capture the lived realities of adolescents while simultaneously challenging dominant ideologies of standardized English. These strategies not only enhance literary credibility but also affirm marginalized voices, allowing characters to articulate resistance and agency through everyday speech. At the same time, the analysis highlights inherent tensions. The temporal volatility of slang risks dating a text, while the representation of dialect carries the danger of reinforcing stereotypes if handled without cultural sensitivity. These challenges underscore the responsibility of authors to balance authenticity with ethical representation. The findings contribute to ongoing conversations in sociolinguistics and literary studies by illustrating how youth vernaculars operate within fiction as sites of cultural negotiation, solidarity, and resistance. Future research may build on this work by examining how slang and dialect are represented across global YA literatures, how these features evolve alongside digital communication practices, and how readers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds interpret them. In doing so, scholars can further illuminate the dynamic interplay between language, identity, and literature in shaping adolescent experience. While this study provides valuable insights into the role of slang and dialect in YA literature, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis was restricted to three English-language novels—*The Outsiders*, *The Hate U Give*, and *Long Way Down*. This narrow scope limits the generalizability of the findings to YA texts across different cultural and linguistic contexts. Future research should expand the corpus to include a broader range of global YA works. Second, the qualitative textual approach emphasizes close reading and interpretation, which, while rich in detail, does not capture readers' reception directly. Audience studies, such as surveys or focus groups with adolescent readers, would provide a more nuanced understanding of how slang and dialect shape engagement. Finally, the study did not systematically track the evolution of slang over time. Given the rapid pace at which youth language changes, longitudinal analyses could illuminate how the temporality of slang affects the enduring relevance of YA literature.

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