

The New York Times: “Algospeak, How Social Media Is Transforming The Future Of language” [C2]

Linguista laureato ad Harvard, Adam Aleksic ha trovato il suo pubblico (ma anche il riconoscimento accademico) su TikTok. Dalla piattaforma documenta l’evoluzione dell’inglese ai tempi dell’algoritmo.

Adam Aleksic has been thinking about seggs. Not sex, but seggs — a substitute term that took off a few years ago among those trying to [dodge](#) content-moderation restrictions on TikTok. Influencers shared stories from their “seggs lives” and spoke about the importance of “seggs education.” Lots of similarly inventive [workarounds](#) have emerged to discuss sensitive or suggestive topics online. This phenomenon is called ‘Algospeak’ (a [portmanteau](#) of ‘algorithm’ and ‘speak’ that Aleksic invented), and it has [yielded](#) terms like ‘cornucopia’ for homophobia and ‘unalive’, a euphemism for ‘suicide’ that has made its way into middle schoolers’ offline vocabulary. These words [roll off](#) the tongue for Aleksic, a twenty-four-year-old linguist and content creator who posts as Etymology Nerd on social media. Others may find them slightly [bewildering](#). But, as he argues in a new book, Algospeak: How Social Media Is Transforming the Future of Language, these distinctly 21st-century [coinages](#) are [worthy](#) of consideration by anyone interested in the forces that mold our [shifting](#) lexicon. “The more I looked into it, the more I realized that algorithms are really affecting every aspect of modern language change,” Aleksic said in a recent interview, [padding around](#) the Manhattan apartment he shares with a roommate and wearing socks [stitched](#) with tiny dolphins. Even those who [steer clear](#) of social media are not exempt. If you have encountered Oxford University Press’s 2024 word of the year, ‘[brain rot](#)’ (the “supposed deterioration of a person’s mental or intellectual state”, thanks to a [firehose](#) of digital content), you, too, [have had a brush](#) with social media’s ability to incubate slang and catapult it into the offline world. Aleksic has been dissecting slang associated with Gen Z on social media since 2023. In [wobbly](#), [breathless](#) videos that are usually about a minute long, he uses his [undergraduate degree](#) in linguistics from Harvard University to explain

the spread of terms including '[lowkey](#)' and 'gyat'. (If you must know, the latter is a synonym for '[butt](#)'.) The videos are more rigorous than their informal quality might suggest. Each one takes four or five hours to compose, he said. He scripts every word, and [combs](#) Google Scholar for relevant papers from academic journals that he can cite in screenshots.

'RIZZ': A CASE STUDY

In person, Aleksic is animated but not frenetic, a [click](#) or three less intense than he appears in his videos. He is happy to [lean into](#) the [persona](#) of a fast-talking [know-it-all](#) if it means [engaging](#) people who wouldn't otherwise [spare a thought](#) for etymology. He started speeding up his cadence when he realized that [brisk](#) videos tended to get more views. "I'll retake a video if I don't think I spoke fast enough," he said. Just as Aleksic changed the way he spoke in response to algorithmic pressure, language, too, can be [bent](#) by users seeking an audience on social media. Take 'rizz', which means something along the lines of 'charisma'. According to Aleksic, the word was popularized by Twitch streamer Kai Cenat, whose young fans [picked up](#) the term. So did the robust ecosystem of people online who make fun of Cenat's every move. Soon, the word had been [flagged](#) by TikTok's recommendation algorithm as a trending topic that it could highlight to keep viewers engaged. Influencers — including Aleksic — who wanted their posts to be pushed to more viewers now had an incentive to join in. This process [slingshots](#) trendy [coinages](#) into the broader consciousness. But it also [yanks](#) terms from their original context faster than ever before, he said. Words with origins in African American English, for instance, are often [mislabeled](#) as Gen Z slang or internet slang. Aleksic [tackles](#) that well-documented phenomenon in a chapter titled "It's Giving Appropriation." Other sections of the book spend time with subcultures that [play an outsize role](#) in modern language generation, including K-pop fans, who [boosted](#) the term 'delulu', and incels, or involuntary celibates, who popularized the term 'sigma'. Words have always traveled from insular communities into wider usage: Aleksic likes the example of 'OK', which was Boston newspaper slang in the 19th century that spread with the help of Martin Van Buren's reelection campaign. (His

nickname in full, “Old Kinderhook”, was a bit of a **mouthful**.) But ‘delulu’ and ‘rizz’ didn’t need the eighth president’s help to travel across the country — they had the internet. And TikTok’s powerful algorithm is more efficient at **getting the word out** than Old Kinderhook’s most **overachieving** press secretary. Today, the cycle of word generation has been **turbocharged** to the point that some of its **output hardly** makes sense. Nowhere is that more evident than in a chapter titled “Sticking Out Your Gyat for the Rizzler”, a chaotic **mélange** of slang that is hilarious to middle schoolers precisely because it is so illegible to adults. Words and phrases don’t need to be understood to go viral — they just have to be funny enough to retain our attention. Aleksic argues that algospeak is no longer as simple as swapping sex for ‘seggs’; it is a linguistic ecosystem in which words **rocket** from the margins to the mainstream in a matter of days, and sometimes **fade** just as fast. When influencers modify their vocabulary and speech patterns for maximum visibility, those patterns are reinforced among their audiences. Does that have to be a bad thing? Moments of linguistic **upheaval**, like the proliferation of netspeak in the early 2000s, are not always as scary as they seem, the linguist David Crystal argued in his 2001 book *Language and the Internet*. Rather, they can allow for **bursts** of creativity. “The internet is *Homo loquens* at its best,” Professor Crystal told The New York Times in 2001. “It shows language expanding richly in all sorts of directions.” Aleksic said he works hard to keep viewers’ attention, for example, jumping between camera angles roughly every eight seconds. He **longed for** a forum in which he could discuss his ideas **at length**, and last January, he began refining an idea for a book about algorithms and language. That’s an ambitious goal for a recent college graduate without an advanced degree or decades of research experience, the kinds of qualifications that abound in the linguistics publishing crowd. But youth has its **upsides** when it comes to the world of internet slang, said Gretchen McCulloch, the author of *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*. “The **tricky** thing with internet linguistics is that the point at which you’re the most qualified to speak about it from **personal** experience is also the point at which you have the least, sort of, academic credibility,” McCulloch said in an interview. She, too, is fascinated by how short-form video is affecting language, though she wonders which changes will be permanent and which will **fade** with time.

Take the way that influencers often begin their videos with superlatives like “The most interesting thing about ...” Will those hyperbolic phrases **bleed into** other forms of communication, or will they lose their potency with overuse? There is a whole **graveyard** full of internet-speak that has fallen out of fashion. While Aleksic **wades through** these big questions, he is also making time for really small ones. He is hoping to make a video about urinal conversations, which have been the subject of more academic papers than you might think. While we spoke, **he pulled up his email inbox** to scan through the questions that had come in from his followers. (He gets about ten a day.) “Somebody emailed me about the word ‘thank’ versus ‘thanks,’” he said, scrolling through a message. “You know, that’s kind of interesting.”

UNALIVE

verb/adjective used to describe death or dying in a softened or algorithm-friendly way or as a replacement for the verb ‘kill’ or other death-related terms. It is typically used as a way of circumventing social media platform rules that prohibit, remove, censor, or demonetize content that explicitly mentions killing or suicide. **example** “The character got unalived in the final scene.” **etymology** formed by applying the prefix ‘un-’ to ‘alive’. Popularized on TikTok and YouTube to **bypass** moderation filters that restrict sensitive content.

DELULU

adjective someone who is acting **delusional**, often in a humorous or **self-aware** way. Common in fandoms and online communities to refer to unrealistic hopes or fantasies, especially about celebrities or **crushes**. **example** “She’s delulu if she thinks she’s marrying her idol.” **etymology** a **playful** shortening of ‘**delusional**’, widely used in K-pop culture and Gen Z slang.

SKIBIDI

noun/adjective chaotic, absurd, or surreal internet content, often linked to the “Skibidi Toilet” meme series. Can describe a vibe, aesthetic, or behaviour that’s nonsensical or exaggerated. **example** “That video was so skibidi, I couldn’t stop laughing.” **etymology** originates from the 2018 song Skibidi by Little Big; later adopted by meme creators to label bizarre digital humor.

VOLDEMORTING

verb the act of avoiding direct mention of a person, brand, or topic online to prevent drama, algorithmic detection or unwanted attention. Often used when discussing controversial figures or sensitive subjects. **example** “I’m voldemorting my ex in this post so it doesn’t blow up.”” **etymology** inspired by the Harry Potter books and films, where Voldemort is referred to as “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” Adopted in social media to dodge algorithmic scrutiny. Published in The New York Times on 12 July 2025. Reprinted with permission.

Glossary

- **coinages** = neologismi
- **steer clear** = stare lontani
- **getting the word out** = diffondere la voce
- **turbocharged** = accelerare
- **rocket** = decollare
- **nonsensical** = senza senso
- **breathless** = affannosi, senza fiato
- **engaging** = interessare, coinvolgere
- **hardly** = difficilmente
- **mélange** = miscuglio
- **portmanteau** = parola macedonia, parola composta
- **lowkey** = discreto
- **flagged** = segnalare
- **mouthful** = scioglilingua
- **overachieving** = eccessivamente ambizioso
- **self-aware** = consapevole di sé
- **click** = grado, livello
- **longed for** = desiderare
- **worthy** = degni
- **yanks** = rimuovere
- **bursts** = esplosioni, raffiche
- **tricky** = delicata, complicata
- **have had a brush** = entrare in contatto
- **butt** = sedere
- **mislabeled** = etichettare erroneamente
- **upsides** = vantaggi
- **wades through** = immergersi
- **boosted** = promuovere
- **bleed into** = infiltrarsi
- **at length** = in dettaglio
- **roll off** = scorrere facilmente
- **stitched** = ricamare
- **firehose** = valanga (di contenuti digitali)

- **lean into** = assumere
- **brisk** = rapidi, vivaci
- **upheaval** = sconvolgimento
- **shifting** = mutevole
- **combs** = esaminare, passare al setaccio
- **workarounds** = soluzioni alternative
- **undergraduate degree** = laurea
- **tackles** = trattare
- **spare a thought** = riflettere, dedicare un momento
- **play an outsize role** = avere un ruolo sproporzionato
- **persona** = ruolo
- **slingshots** = catapultare
- **fade** = svanire
- **playful** = scherzoso
- **bewildering** = sconcertanti
- **wobbly** = tremolanti
- **know-it-all** = saputello
- **bypass** = aggirare
- **delusional** = delirante
- **crushes** = cotte
- **dodge** = evitare, schivare
- **padding around** = camminare lentamente
- **brain rot** = decadimento mentale
- **graveyard** = cimitero
- **he pulled up his email inbox** = ha aperto la sua casella email
- **yielded** = produrre
- **bent** = modellare
- **picked up** = adottare
- **output** = produzione, risultato