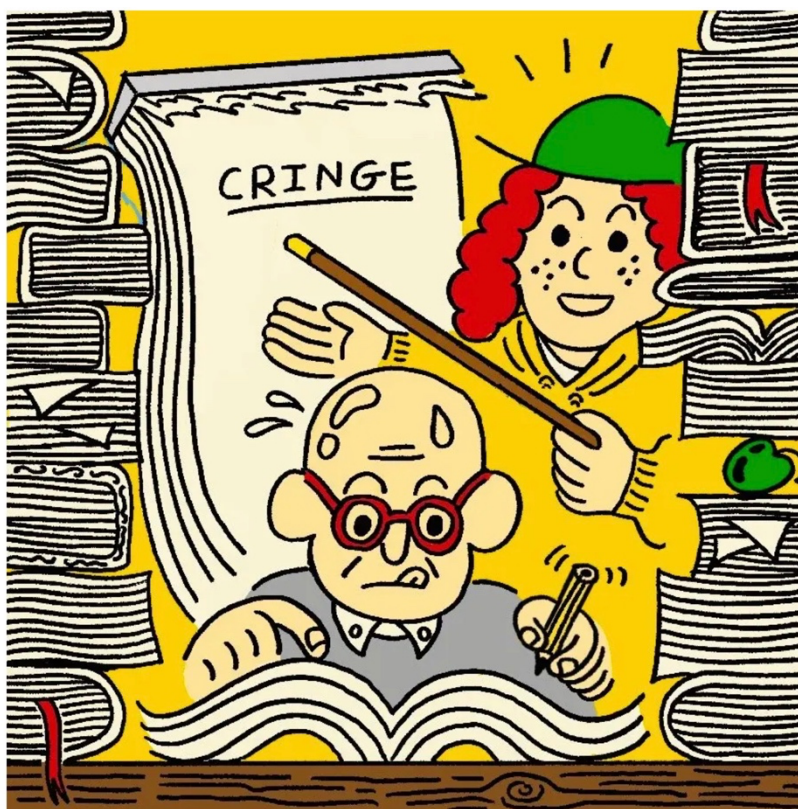


Today's Teenagers Have Invented a Language That Captures the World Perfectly

June 25, 2024



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My son just completed high school and when he leaves for college in the fall my life will change in ways I’m still struggling to contemplate. Among the things I’ll miss most are his lessons in teenage slang. My son has always been generous with me, and I’ve found the slang of his generation to be so much better and more useful than any that I’ve ever used. His slang has also offered me an accidental and useful portrait of how he and his generation see the world.

The primary value of slang has been to create linguistic shibboleths, a way to differentiate yourself quickly from other people. Sometimes the distinction was generational, sometimes it was racial, and sometimes it was ideological, but the slang itself was ultimately a form of social etiquette. From one generation to the next, the terms changed, but the meanings typically didn't. New words were routinely adopted to express familiar concepts: one generation's "cool" becomes another's "dope" and so on.

Members of my son's generation have a vastly superior approach to slang. They've devised a language that responds to the new and distinct reality they face.

Anyone with children, especially ones on the cusp of adulthood, has to reckon with the shameful fact that the world we're leaving them is so much worse than the one we brought them into. My son's slang reflects that: It's a distinct language created for a society that's characterized, online and off, by collapsing institutions, erosions in trust and a loss of faith in a shared sense of meaning.

"Mid" is an obvious example. I don't think it even qualifies as teenage slang anymore — it's too useful and, by now, too widespread. In my son's usage, things that are mid are things that are essentially average or slightly below. You can't really complain about them, but they produce no joy. They're often the result of the refinement of market research to the exact level that tepid consumer acceptance is achieved. Everything in Starbucks falls into the category of "mid." So does everything in an airport. It's a brilliant, precise word for a world full of mild disappointments, where the corner bakery that used to do some things well and other things poorly has been reliably replaced by yet another Le Pain Quotidien.

"Glazed" has a similarly impressive precision. When my son describes something as glazed, it's meant to signify not lying, exactly, or even exaggerating, but the act of positively spinning a judgment. "Glazed" indicates a gilding of information; sports commentary, for example, is 90 percent glaze. When Stephen A. Smith, the quintessential glazer, [likens Anthony Edwards to Michael Jordan](#), a proper response might be "The Ant glazing is crazy." But glaze is also the perfect description of the way social media works: The world you encounter online is perpetually glazed, with everything taking on an artificially positive, unreal and not entirely trustworthy gloss.

There are other revealing terms I've learned from my son: "Sus," short for "suspicious" or "suspect," suggests a world that's dubious enough that you need a diminutive to describe it. "Cringe" is the perfect catchall for that jarring brand of performative sincerity that's so common online. Young people need diminutives to describe these realities; they've become so commonplace.

But my favorite new slang word is "based" — short for "based in fact" or "based in reality" and often used as a term of assent when someone states a controversial opinion. "Canada should join the United States," one might say, to which someone else might reply, "Based." It's typically used for political subjects but it can have a wider social utility: "Luka Doncic should be the M.V.P. of the N.B.A." "Based."

"Based" can have a more malevolent connotation in certain alt-right circles, where being based alludes to allegiance to a contrarian viewpoint. But to my ear, "based" is a perfect word, a necessary word, to describe the informational chaos we inhabit. The fact that being based in reality now qualifies as a compliment is evidence that kids like my son have come of age in a climate in which misinformation, hype and fraud are so endemic that exceptions are notable. For them, to encounter something based in reality is rare enough to deserve its own distinct shorthand.

Young people, as they have from the beginning of time, are figuring out exclusive terms to describe their world. As always, it's a world that the olds cannot comprehend or co-opt. The world of my son's generation is a dark one — full of corporate triumph and the defeat of public spirit, where systems of meaning are decaying and a lack of clarity is spreading.

The kids themselves are the only bright spot, which is why I'm so grateful my son offered me a glimpse into the language of his generation. Another purpose of slang is to demonstrate generational distinction, yet slang has brought my son and me closer. It's taught me that the current crop of teenagers created a language to describe the flawed reality we've abandoned them to, and in doing so they've proved themselves less deluded and more innovative than we were.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/25/opinion/gen-z-slang-language.html>