



## Cognitive Processing of English Slang Borrowings in Uzbek Social Media

**Qiyomidinova Nilufar**  
**Qahramon qizi**

*Uzbekistan State World Languages University,  
Tashkent, Uzbekistan Independent researcher  
(PhD) Email: [nqiyomidinova@gmail.com](mailto:nqiyomidinova@gmail.com)*

**Abstract:** English slang borrowings such as cringe, flex, and ghost have become ubiquitous in Uzbek social media discourse. This article explores how trilingual Uzbek speakers cognitively process these borrowings. Drawing on a corpus analysis of 500 social media posts and a lexical decision experiment with 40 participants, I argue that frequency and semantic transparency determine processing efficiency. High-frequency slang integrates into the bilingual mental lexicon and is accessed as quickly as native Uzbek words, while low-frequency items incur a cognitive cost and rely on contextual cues. These findings align with the BIA+ model and the adaptive control hypothesis, revealing that digital environments reshape lexical access patterns.

**Keywords:** cognitive processing, English slang borrowings, Uzbek social media, bilingual lexical access, BIA+ model

The digital spaces of Uzbekistan—Telegram channels, Instagram stories, and TikTok comments—are saturated with English slang. A young Uzbek user might caption a photo “Bugun juda cringe edi” (Today was very cringe) or comment “U flex qilyapti” (He is flexing). These borrowings are not random; they follow patterns of frequency and semantic function. But what happens inside the mind of the speaker when they read or produce such words? Do they access English lexical entries directly, or do they rely on translation-equivalent processing? This question sits at the intersection of psycholinguistics and digital communication. To understand the cognitive processing of English slang in Uzbek social media, it is necessary to first describe the borrowing landscape. In a corpus of 500 Instagram and Telegram posts collected from Uzbek users aged 18–35 in Tashkent and Samarkand (January–June 2024), the most frequent slang items were cringe (78 occurrences), flex (54), ghost (42), and slay (38). Less common borrowings included sus (18), salty (12), and stan (22). The high-frequency items were typically integrated into Uzbek morphosyntax as adjectives or verbs, while low-frequency items often appeared with hashtags or quotation marks—a metalinguistic signal of their foreignness. The central theoretical framework for understanding how bilinguals process such mixed-language input is the Bilingual Interactive Activation Plus (BIA+) model proposed by Dijkstra and Van Heuven (2002). This model posits that when a bilingual sees a word, both

language systems are initially co-activated. A word like *cringe* activates not only its English lexical representation but also phonologically similar Uzbek words (e.g., *kring*, a non-word). The model further argues that top-down context—such as the surrounding language of a sentence—can bias selection toward one language. In the case of Uzbek social media, where English slang appears within predominantly Uzbek sentences, the context should theoretically facilitate the recognition of English items as legitimate borrowings rather than errors.

A lexical decision experiment with 40 native Uzbek speakers (all proficient in Russian and English at intermediate level or above) tested this prediction. Participants saw 30 English slang borrowings (15 high-frequency, 15 low-frequency), 30 Uzbek control words matched for length and frequency, and 60 nonwords. Each word appeared either in an Uzbek sentence context (e.g., “U juda *cringe* edi”) or in isolation. Reaction times were recorded. The results were striking. High-frequency slang borrowings like *cringe* and *flex* were recognized as quickly as native Uzbek words—mean reaction times of 620 ms and 608 ms, respectively, with no statistically significant difference ( $p = .34$ ). This suggests that these items have become fully integrated into the bilingual mental lexicon. They are no longer processed as “foreign” but are accessed directly, much like any Uzbek word. This finding supports the adaptive control hypothesis (Green & Abutalebi, 2013), which argues that frequent language switching—precisely the behavior observed in Uzbek social media—strengthens the neural pathways involved in lexical selection and inhibition.

Low-frequency borrowings, in contrast, showed a clear processing disadvantage. Items like *sus*, *salty*, and *stan* were recognized significantly more slowly (mean RT: 712 ms,  $p < .01$ ) and with more errors (8% error rate vs. 2% for high-frequency items). Interestingly, context mattered for these items: they were recognized faster when embedded in a sentence (698 ms) than in isolation (726 ms). This indicates that low-frequency borrowings require additional cognitive effort—likely involving semantic inference or metalinguistic awareness—and that the surrounding Uzbek sentence provides helpful cues. Grosjean’s (2001) language mode hypothesis is relevant here: in a mixed-language context, the bilingual system is primed to expect switches, reducing the cognitive burden for less entrenched items.

The semantic transparency of slang also played a role. Items like *cringe* (a universal feeling) and *flex* (an action easily observed in gym culture) are transparent: their meaning is inferable from the context even for a reader with limited English. In contrast, *stan* (derived from Eminem’s song, meaning obsessive fan) and *salty* (meaning bitter or annoyed) are opaque: their meaning is culturally specific and not easily guessed. The experiment showed that opaque items were processed more slowly than transparent ones, even when frequency was controlled. This aligns with Kroll and Stewart’s (1994) revised hierarchical model, which posits that less familiar L2 words rely on the L1 translation equivalent for access. These findings have broader implications. The cognitive entrenchment of high-frequency slang suggests that social media is not just a passive medium for language contact but an active force in restructuring the bilingual mental lexicon. For Uzbek speakers, words like *cringe* may no longer feel like borrowings at all—they are simply part of the lexical toolbox, accessed automatically and effortlessly. This process mirrors what Poplack (1980)

described as “established borrowings” in spoken language, but it happens at a much faster pace in digital spaces.

There are limitations to this study. The lexical decision task measures only written recognition, not production. Real-time processing during natural social media browsing—measured through eye-tracking or EEG—might reveal different patterns. Additionally, the sample was limited to urban, educated users; speakers from rural areas or older generations may process these borrowings very differently.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that cognitive processing of English slang in Uzbek social media is a function of frequency and transparency. High-frequency, transparent borrowings become cognitively native, while low-frequency or opaque items require extra effort and contextual support. As English continues to permeate Uzbek digital life, these processing patterns will likely intensify, potentially reshaping the entire bilingual system. Future research should examine how this entrenchment affects the processing of native Uzbek synonyms and whether it leads to lexical attrition or semantic shift.

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