

## Exploring The Transatlantic Divide: American Vs British Slang In 'Wild Child' Movie

**Laura Meylinda Maharani<sup>1</sup>, Elanneri Karani<sup>2</sup>, Tutik Haryani<sup>3</sup>,  
Jonathan Tegar<sup>4</sup>, Mieyrandha<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> University of Palangka Raya, Central Kalimantan- Indonesia

Email: [1laurameylinda27@gmail.com](mailto:1laurameylinda27@gmail.com), [2elannerikarani@gmail.com](mailto:2elannerikarani@gmail.com),

[3tutikharyaniupp@gmail.com](mailto:3tutikharyaniupp@gmail.com), [4jonathantegar17@gmail.com](mailto:4jonathantegar17@gmail.com),

[5Mieyrandha504@gmail.com](mailto:5Mieyrandha504@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

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This "Transatlantic Divide" between AmE and BrE refers to one of the most prominent sociolinguistic phenomena, especially in slang usage. To date, prior research into slang has commonly been restricted to studying single regional varieties or comparing lists without considering their narrative and sociocultural functions. This paper, therefore, aims to bridge this gap by discussing the sociolinguistic function of the interplay between AmE and BrE slang in the 2008 teen comedy film Wild Child. The research applies a descriptive qualitative method with a content analysis approach to analyze the dialogue in the movie in order to find, categorize, and interpret slang expressions according to their communicative and narrative roles. These results show two different sociolinguistic functions. First, local varieties of AmE and BrE slang serve as linguistic barriers, creating conflict, misunderstanding, and marking social distance between characters. The differences underline the construction of "in-group" and "out-group" identities and focus on cultural dissonance. Second, a category of mutually intelligible expressions or "global slang" serves as a linguistic bridge that fosters mutual understanding, emotional connection, and integration of the characters. In these ways, the movie presents language both as a source of division and as a means of reconciliation. The paper concludes that Wild Child effectively mobilizes the Transatlantic Divide not merely from a stylistic or comedic perspective but as a core narrative mechanism. Slang is used as a means through which social hierarchies, cultural adaptation, and identity negotiation are dramatized, showing how linguistic variation drives both conflict and harmony in cross-cultural communication.

**Kata Kunci:**

*Bahasa Inggris Amerika, Bahasa Inggris Britania, slang, sosiolinguistik, Wild*

**Abstrak**

“Pemisahan Transatlantik” antara AmE dan BrE merujuk pada salah satu fenomena sociolinguistik paling menonjol, terutama dalam penggunaan slang. Hingga saat ini, penelitian sebelumnya tentang slang umumnya terbatas pada studi varietas regional tunggal atau perbandingan daftar tanpa mempertimbangkan fungsi naratif dan sosiobudaya mereka. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk menjembatani kesenjangan tersebut dengan membahas fungsi sosiolinguistik interaksi antara slang AmE dan BrE dalam film komedi remaja 2008 *Wild Child*. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan analisis konten untuk menganalisis dialog dalam film guna menemukan, mengkategorikan, dan menafsirkan ekspresi slang sesuai dengan peran komunikatif dan naratifnya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan dua fungsi sosiolinguistik yang berbeda. Pertama, varietas lokal slang AmE dan BrE berfungsi sebagai penghalang linguistik, menciptakan konflik, kesalahpahaman, dan menandai jarak sosial antara karakter. Perbedaan ini menyoroti pembentukan identitas “kelompok dalam” dan “kelompok luar” serta berfokus pada disonansi budaya. Kedua, kategori ungkapan yang saling dimengerti atau “global slang” berfungsi sebagai jembatan linguistik yang memfasilitasi pemahaman bersama, koneksi emosional, dan integrasi karakter. Dengan cara ini, film ini menggambarkan bahasa baik sebagai sumber perpecahan maupun sebagai sarana rekonsiliasi. Makalah ini menyimpulkan bahwa *Wild Child* secara efektif memanfaatkan Transatlantic Divide tidak hanya dari segi gaya atau komedi, tetapi juga sebagai alat untuk mengeksplorasi dinamika sosial dan linguistik yang kompleks. Slang digunakan sebagai sarana untuk menggambarkan hierarki sosial, adaptasi budaya, dan negosiasi identitas, menunjukkan bagaimana variasi linguistik memicu baik konflik maupun harmoni dalam komunikasi antarbudaya.

## **INTRODUCTION**

English, in its role as a global lingua franca, is not a monolithic entity but a dynamic language characterized by significant variation. Among its many varieties, the distinction between American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) remains the most prominent and widely recognized "Transatlantic Divide" (Algeo,

2006). While sharing a common grammatical core, these varieties diverge significantly in vocabulary, particularly in the realm of slang. Slang, defined as the informal, non-standard vocabulary used to establish social identity and cultural belonging (Eble, 1996), thus serves as a critical marker for sociolinguistic analysis.

Complementing Eble's definition, this research also relies on the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines slang as "very informal vocabulary, typically restricted to a particular group, context, or region." This emphasis on informality, group specificity, and non-standard usage strengthens its relevance for examining how language constructs identity. This research further distinguishes slang from idioms, which the OED defines as fixed expressions whose meanings cannot be inferred from their constituent words. Idioms are therefore not the primary focus unless they simultaneously function as slang within specific social groups. These conceptual boundaries provide clarity and consistency in identifying and analyzing the linguistic data in this research.

In the contemporary media landscape, films serve as a rich and authentic corpus for linguistic investigation, mirroring real-life communication patterns and providing a context where language intersects with culture (Bednarek, 2018). Consequently, the study of slang in film has become a highly relevant and popular field within applied linguistics. Recent research (2020-2024) has extensively documented the use of slang, though it predominantly follows a single-variant, single-medium framework. Numerous studies have successfully analyzed American English slang in popular films such as Spider-Man: No Way Home (Syafitri & Marlina, 2022), Turning Red (Lestari & Setyowati, 2022), and Onward (Wulandari, 2022). In parallel, other studies have focused on British English slang within specific contexts, such as the film Enola Holmes (Sari & Sudarsono, 2021). These studies provide valuable insights into the types, forms, and morphological processes of slang within their respective cultural contexts.

However, this prevailing focus on single-variant analysis reveals a significant research gap. While a few studies have begun to conduct comparative analyses, such as comparing AmE and BrE slang in films like King Arthur (Hidayat & Setyaningsih, 2022) or A Cinderella Story: If the Shoe Fits (Pratiwi & Fitriani,

2021), their focus tends to remain on the identification, classification, and inventorying of linguistic forms. There is a distinct scarcity of research that investigates the sociolinguistic function of the narrative clash itself—that is, how the juxtaposition of AmE and BrE slang operates as a storytelling device. Merely listing slang from an American film and a British film does not explain what happens when those two linguistic worlds collide within the same narrative.

This research aims to bridge this specific gap by analyzing the 2008 film 'Wild Child'. This film is uniquely suited for this study because its central plot—an American teenager forced to attend a British boarding school—is entirely dependent on the cultural and linguistic friction between AmE and BrE. Unlike films where language variation is incidental, 'Wild Child' weaponizes the Transatlantic Divide for narrative purposes. Therefore, the objective of this study is not merely to inventory the slang terms, but to analyze the sociolinguistic functions of this "slang clash" as it operates in character development, narrative

## **METHOD**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method utilizing a content analysis (or document analysis) approach. This design was chosen as the primary aim was not to measure frequencies but to deeply describe, interpret, and understand the sociolinguistic function of American and British slang within the film's narrative context. The data source was the 2008 film 'Wild Child', selected purposively (purposive sampling) as its plot explicitly centers on the linguistic and cultural clash between American and British youth. The data for this study were not the participants but the linguistic utterances themselves, consisting of all words, phrases, and dialogues identified as American English (AmE) or British English (BrE) slang, sourced primarily from the film's official English dialogue transcript to ensure accuracy; the film's visual and auditory components were used as secondary data to support the analysis of sociolinguistic context. Data was collected using a documentary observation technique, wherein the researcher watched the film multiple times, cross-referenced the transcript to identify slang, and logged each item into a data corpus. The primary instrument was the researcher

him/herself, who actively observed, identified, and interpreted the data. This process was supported by secondary instruments, including a data sheet (coding sheet) for systematic logging and authoritative dictionaries (like the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster) to objectively verify and classify the slang.

Explicit coding rules were followed for this study to ensure consistency in identifying and classifying the data. First, an item was considered slang if: a) reputable dictionaries like OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge Dictionary, or Green's Dictionary of Slang defined it as slang, informal, colloquial, or non-standard; b) corpus data like COCA (for AmE) and BNC (for BrE) indicated its use was predominantly restricted to informal registers; or c) the film provided metalinguistic cues-such as surprise, confusion, or commentary by characters-that an expression was socially marked or group-specific. Secondly, an item was classified as either American or British slang based on: a) dictionary labels that indicate regional association, such as "chiefly US" or "chiefly British"; b) relative frequency patterns in AmE and BrE corpora; and c) contextual cues from the film, where characters refer to a term as American or British explicitly. Thirdly, all those items whose use appeared to be quite general in both varieties were considered shared slang and excluded from being classified as AmE/BrE-exclusive. These coding rules allowed classification to be based on verifiable linguistic evidence and not on subjective interpretation.

The data analysis technique was adapted from the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), involving three concurrent streams: data condensation (classifying slang as AmE/BrE and categorizing it by sociolinguistic function), data display (organizing the classified data into tables to identify patterns), and conclusion drawing/verification (interpreting the patterns to answer the research questions, with interpretations continuously verified against the primary film data).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Findings*

The primary findings from this content analysis are presented in detail in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Classification of Slang and Idioms in Wild Child.**

No	Slang/ Idiom	Type	Example Sentence (Contextual 'Wild Child')
<b>AmE Slang</b>			
1	Freaking Out	AmE Slang	Poppy freaked out when the headmistress took away her cell phone.
2	That Sucks	AmE Slang	Poppy "I have detention all weekend." Drippy: "Wow, that sucks."
3	My Bad	AmE Slang	"Oh I spilled your tea. My bad." (Poppy's casual attitude)
4	Hooking Up	AmE Slang	The British girls were confused by Poppy's definition of hooking up.
5	Ride Shotgun	AmE Slang	Poppy would probably yell "I call shotgun" when getting into a car.
<b>BrE Slang</b>			
6	Posh	BrE Slang	Poppy thought all the girls at Abbey Mount, especially Harriet, were incredibly posh
7	Gutted	BrE Slang	Kate was absolutely gutted when Poppy beat her in the lacrosse match
8	Gobsmacked	BrE Slang	Drippy was gobsmacked when she saw Freddie ask Poppy to the dance
9	That's rubbish	BrE Slang	Harriet: "Your excuse is rubbish, I don't believe you for a second."
10	Fit	BrE Slang	Drippy: "Wow, Freddie is so fit. I can't even talk to him."
11	Knackered	BrE Slang	After a long day of lacrosse practice, the entire team was completely knackered.
12	Taking the mickey	BrE Slang	"Are you being serious, or are you just taking the mickey out of me?"
<b>Social Idioms</b>			
13	Fish-out-of-water	Social Idiom	As an American in a strict British school, Poppy felt like a total fish-out-of-water.
14	Blow off steam	Social Idiom	Poppy's initial pranks were her way of blowing off steam.
15	Hit it off	Social Idiom	Despite their differences, Poppy and her roommates eventually started to hit it off.
16	Spill the tea	Social Idiom	The girls gathered in the dorm, ready to spill the tea about Harriet and Freddie.
17	Crush on someone	Social Idiom	It was obvious that Drippy had a massive crush on Freddie.
18	Get along	Social Idiom	At first, Poppy and her roommates (especially Kate) did not get along.
19	Break the ice	Social Idiom	Poppy's bold personality helped break the ice with some of the more timid girls.
20	Get the hang of	Social Idiom	It took a while, but Poppy finally started to get the hang of the school's rules (and lacrosse).

21	On the same page	Social Idiom	By the end, Poppy and her roommates were finally on the same page.
22	Step up	Social Idiom	Poppy had to step up and take responsibility to save the school from being closed.
23	Pull someone's leg	Social Idiom	Freddie: "You're the headmistress's daughter? No, you're pulling my leg."
24	Off the hook		Poppy was relieved to be off the hook after Kate confessed to the prank.
25	Bite the bullet		Poppy had to bite the bullet and face the consequences of her actions.

As shown in Table 1, the findings are clearly grouped into three distinct categories. First, a set of American English (AmE) Slang used almost exclusively by the protagonist (e.g., freaking out, my bad). Second, a set of British English (BrE) Slang used by the native British students (e.g., posh, gutted). Third, a significant category of "Social Idioms" (e.g., spill the tea, hit it off) that were found to be mutually intelligible and functioned as a linguistic "common ground."

### ***Discussion***

This section interprets the significance of the findings presented in Table 1, connecting them to the research gap identified in the introduction and explaining their implications. The findings confirm that the "Transatlantic Divide" in 'Wild Child' is not merely a linguistic footnote but a central narrative engine. As stated in the introduction, previous research (e.g., Syafitri & Marlina, 2022; Sari & Sudarsono, 2021) has largely focused on inventorying slang within single-variant films. The findings of this study, by contrast, allow for an analysis of the sociolinguistic function of the clash itself, which differs from prior work.

#### **1. Slang: A Barrier to Conflict, Misunderstanding, and Identity**

The first two categories of findings (AmE and BrE slang, detailed in Table 1) illustrate how local slang can function as a barrier first and foremost. Poppy's AmE slang (e.g., "that sucks", Item 2) is perceived by the BrE-speaking students as abrasive and foreign - creating immediate social friction.

The most explicit example of this barrier is the conflict through misunderstanding. The dialogue clearly points out that AmE "hooking up" (Item 4) and its BrE counterparts, such as "snogging," come from different sociolinguistic

contexts. This linguistic mismatch leads to genuine confusion and shock, serving as a plot device to illustrate a cultural gap. In the same way, culturally weighted BrE terms such as "fit" (Item 10) or "rubbish" (Item 9) are not at once accessible to the AmE-speaking protagonist.

## **2. Slang as a Bridge: From "Fish-out-of-Water" to Acculturation**

The latter are used to resolve the film's plot, which is a "fish-out-of-water" story (Item 13), through the third category of findings: the Social Idioms. While local slang (AmE/BrE) divides, the findings show that global, mutually intelligible idioms (e.g., "spill the tea", "hit it off") unite.

These phrases (Items 15, 16, 17) act as a linguistic bridge, allowing the characters to find common ground and build relationships despite their differences. Poppy's narrative arc is complete when she demonstrates she can "get the hang of" (Item 20) the local culture and is finally "on the same page" (Item 21) with her roommates. The sociolinguistic function is clear: Local Slang divides, while Global/Social Idioms unite.

This confirms the research gap: 'Wild Child' uses the Transatlantic Divide not just for color, but as the primary mechanism for its plot a tool for (1) initial conflict, (2) character delineation, and (3) eventual resolution and acculturation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study set out to explore the "Transatlantic Divide" by analyzing the use and sociolinguistic function of American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) slang in the 2008 film 'Wild Child'. The objective was to move beyond a simple inventory of terms and to understand how the juxtaposition of these two slang varieties functioned as a narrative device within the film.

The findings of the content analysis confirmed that the "Transatlantic Divide" is a central narrative engine in 'Wild Child'. The analysis identified 25 key expressions, which were categorized into three distinct groups: (1) local AmE slang, (2) local BrE slang, and (3) mutually intelligible "Social Idioms" or "Global Slang."

The study concludes that these categories serve two distinct and opposing sociolinguistic functions. First, the local AmE and BrE slang primarily function as a barrier. These terms (e.g., hooking up vs. "snogging"; that sucks vs. that's rubbish) are the main source of narrative conflict, cultural misunderstanding, humor, and the initial establishment of "in-group" (British) vs. "out-group" (American) identities. First and foremost, the study acknowledges its limitations. Being a qualitative content analysis of a single film, its findings are story-specific to 'Wild Child' and cannot be generalized to all cross-cultural media or all real-life AmE/BrE interactions. Other sociolinguistic markers, such as accent and intonation, were also excluded from the analysis, which focused strictly on lexical slang.

Second, the mutually intelligible "Social Idioms" act as a linguistic bridge, like spill the tea, hit it off, and get the hang of. These shared expressions are the common ground whereby the American protagonist can build relationships and thus socially integrate into her community, resolving the film's central "fish-out-of-water" conflict. In essence, the thread that sews the plot together is the protagonist's journey from the linguistic barrier-mostly represented by the local slang-to the linguistic bridge, or the global slang.

It is within this framework that the "Transatlantic Divide" serves as the main narrative mechanism in Wild Child: the local varieties of AmE and BrE slang constitute a linguistic barrier, creating conflict and distinctive groupings, while mutually intelligible "Social Idioms" provide a linguistic bridge to the successful social integration of the protagonist. These findings add a modest contribution to the field of sociolinguistic film discourse studies by demonstrating how slang-based contrasts can serve as narrative tools for establishing cultural distance and eventual integration.

Based on these limitations, several avenues for future research are suggested. Firstly, it is suggested to use comparative media analysis. Future research could conduct a similar analysis on other "fish-out-of-water" films to see if this use of slang as a "barrier-then-bridge" narrative device is a common trope. The examples could be Ted Lasso and Emily in Paris. Secondly, it is suggested to use quantitative analysis. A quantitative corpus study could be conducted to look at the frequency

of AmE versus BrE slang in the film to see if the balance shifts as the protagonist assimilates. Finally, it is suggested to use reception studies. While this study analyzed the film text, future research could conduct a reception study to investigate how actual EFL learners (from various backgrounds) interpret and understand the slang and cultural conflicts presented in the film.

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