The Newest in Slang: Are You *Eating*?

November 15, 2024
Article By: Bridget Winthrop

"You're *eating*!!" "You *ate* that up!" "I'm not gonna lie, she's *eating* you up." The word *eating* and its past tense form *ate* seems to have made its way into the slang world, used prominently across social media and very noticeable in Southern California. What does the younger generation mean when using the terms *eating* and *ate* in slang terms, and why are they not referring to food? While the terms *eating* and *ate* have grown socially throughout the English language, it has yet to be acknowledged as proper grammar by prescriptive standards and its usage continues to develop, as I discuss below.

Definition, Grammatical, and Demographics for the Term:

Based on its usage, when someone *eats,* they have done something successfully, in style, and in an impressive manner. It's often used interchangeably with the phrase: "They did *that*." The word is used in present tense just as much as past tense as an adjective to concisely describe someone or something. It often describes someone in reference to their actions, appearance, fashion, performance, music, and more.

Since moving to university in Santa Barbara, and using social media platforms like TikTok, I have noticed an increase in the use of this word among my peers. The term is used increasingly among the younger Generation Z and more commonly used by girls. If a 13 year old were to download the app TikTok, it would be to no one's surprise that in two weeks they were describing someone's actions as *eating*. The comment section on TikTok alone teaches a new user the large popularity of this term, especially in the effort to compliment someone. With the

fast influence of social media apps today, the term has rapidly grown in popularity. I have begun to use the term so casually as an adjective that I become forgetful that it is a slang word. Nevertheless, when I return back home and use the term around my parents or grandparents I notice a generational misunderstanding, as they turn around and give me a confused look. Because of its origins, discussed below, the term is popular in the LGBTQ+ community as well, commonly used to describe someone's fashion or performance. Based on my personal experience with the term, it has been stigmatized as a term used only by women and members of the LGBTQ+ community. There is a common shame against its use by straight men, and a perspective that the term is "girly" or "gay" if used unironically by a straight man. This mentality has been socially constructed and driven by toxic masculinity. Lastly, as I will discuss in the origin of the term, the term originated and is commonly used in African American Vernacular across the US and has slowly spread internationally.

Rhetorical and Social Context:

While the term is used across a large variety of demographics, its meaning and usage remains remotely constant as an adjective, often in a positive light. To further describe its use, consider this phrase: "She *ate* that up and left no crumbs." In translation, this means that she successfully cleared the plate of "food" and did something so successfully that she left behind no flaws ("no crumbs"). In the sense that someone is "eating someone up," it means they are dominating the other person in whatever it is that they are doing. It has become so common in the younger generation's vocabulary that it is used to describe simple actions as well. For example, if I were to ask my friend how she did on her exam and she felt strongly about it, she might casually respond with: "I *ate* that." With that simple response, I know that my friend did

well on her test and the conversation will continue onto something else. Another contextual example is when the term is used negatively. One might say: "I thought I *ate*" or "I'm not *eating* right now." This use of the term is to emphasize a negative feeling and to explain that the person does not feel good about themselves at that moment. This can be in reference to a wide variety of things, from their appearance, to the way they are performing at something, or the way they feel. If it's used to state someone else is not *eating,* it is meant negatively and in a critical way against how that person is doing something.

Origin:

How did this term transform into what it is today? How did the term *eat*, defined by the Mariam Webster dictionary as "to take in through the mouth as food: ingest, chew, and shallow in turn," become used in such an unrelated manner (*Definition of EAT*)? Historically, in all social, academic, and professional settings, the term eat is used in reference to food and the process of its consumption. The term transformed into slang in the early 2000's, originating in African American and LGBTQ+ communities in the US. While the exact location of its origin is not determined, there is a common understanding that the term "'she ate' was used as a term of admiration and praise for a woman who was performing exceptionally well in a drag show, dance competition, or similar performance" (*What Does "Ate" Mean on Social?*). On social media, the term is still often used by this community, but has grown to a wider audience as well. In its growth, its use has become more casual and has expanded to describe things past just fashion and dance performances. Social media has influenced the growth of countless slang terms, many of which are created by marginalized communities. The speed at which social platforms relay

information causes rapid changes in the English language and the demographics in which words such as *eating* and *ate* are used.

Longevity:

The longevity of this term is up for debate, along with many words trending on social media at this time. In my opinion, the terms *eating* and *ate* will be relevant for multiple years, especially in Generation Z. I believe that once a term is ingrained in the vocabulary of a child or teenager, it's difficult to erase very rapidly. As the younger generation grows, the term may either disappear with age, or it may carry on and become implemented in the vocabularies of future generations. In my personal experience, I find myself using this term mostly while writing on social media and when discussing with people my age or younger. In academic or professional settings, this term has never come to my mind because of its casual use. Therefore, I don't believe the slang definition of *eating* will be added to the dictionary, but it may become widely understood across the English speaking population. In addition, I believe that because of its ease and concise manner of describing a situation or person, the term will remain relevant for some time. Lastly, the term has been used in LGBTQ+ and AAV communities for nearly two decades, and its large prominence in these communities will keep it alive for some time, regardless if its usage remains popular on social media or in pop culture.

Bibliography

Definition of EAT. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eat. Accessed 23 Feb.

2024.

What Does "Ate" Mean on Social? | Later Social Media Glossary.

https://later.com/social-media-glossary/ate/. Accessed 23 Feb. 2024.