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What's in a “брат”? Identity construction and labeling by young Bulgarian speakers

Какво е “брат”? Конструиране на идентичност в речта на младите българи

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Abstract. This study explores the sociolinguistic and pragmatic functions of the Bulgarian term “брат” (‘brother’) in contemporary youth discourse, focusing on its role in identity construction and stance-taking. Based on survey data from 323 respondents aged 14–69, the findings reveal that *брат* functions as a stance indexical used predominantly by adolescents and young adults to signal solidarity, familiarity, and in-group affiliation. Gendered interpretations vary, with female speakers often reframing the term as a marker of expressivity rather than as a marker of masculinity. In contrast, non-active users, especially older respondents, frequently associate *брат* with ignorance or low prestige language, reflecting language ideologies that regulate slang use. The study demonstrates that *брат* has undergone a pragmatic shift from a kinship term to a socially marked address form that indexes generational, ideological, and stylistic identity. These findings contribute to our understanding how address terms mediate social differentiation and how innovative linguistic choices are perceived across generational cohorts within contemporary Bulgarian society.

Абстракт: Обект на настоящото изследване са социолингвистичните и прагматични функции на българския термин *брат* в съвременния младежки дискурс, като се фокусира върху неговата роля в изграждането на идентичността и заемането на различни социални роли от говорещите. Хипотезите, поставени в изследването, се основат на данни от проучване сред 323 респонденти на възраст 14–69 години. Въпреки че изследването не претендира за национална представителност, резултатите показват, че терминът присъства в речта на младите българи със значение на маркер, който индексира различни социални позиции. Така *брат* се използва за комуникация на позициите за солидарност (активните ползватели на термина са склонни да го използват като нарицателно към човек, с когото говорещите нямат пряка роднинска връзка, а по-скоро възприемат адресата като близък приятел или съмишленик, с когото имат общи интереси), фамилиарност – към човек, с когото имат близки приятелски взаимоотношения или принадлежат към една и съща група. Интерпретациите, разпознавани от респондентите от различни възрастови групи, декларирани или не полова принадлежност, варират – жените често преформулират термина като маркер за експресивност, а не като маркер, който комуникира гореспоменатите значения. За разлика от това, неактивните потребители, особено по-възрастните респонденти, често свързват употребата на термина с невежество или езикова употреба, която издава ниското образователно ниво на говорещия.

Keywords: youth language, Bulgarian slang, identity construction, address terms, *брат* (‘brother’), sociolinguistic function, linguistic attitudes, pragmatic shift, slang and stigma, stance and indexicality

Ключови думи: младежки сленг, конструиране на идентичност, маркери за идентичност, *брат*, социолингвистична функция, езикови нагласи, прагматична промяна, индексирание на социални позиции

1. Introduction

1.1 Language Use and Identity

Identity is not solely an internal, individual construct but is shaped and influenced by external factors, such as social norms, cultural beliefs, and linguistic practices. I will quote here the words of Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall: “Identity is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the preexisting source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore as a fundamentally social and cultural phenomenon.” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 588). Social identity is often considered to be signaled through arbitrary phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical or discursive structures on the macro- and micro-linguistic level. Through language, people make sense of their own experiences and thoughts, and they also present and project their own identity to others through self-expression, self-presentation, and social positioning. Furthermore, identity is viewed as a dynamic and ongoing process rather than a fixed or static entity. It is continuously negotiated and re-negotiated through social interactions and language use. The words we choose, the way we speak, and the narratives we construct all contribute to the formation and representation of our identities. Moreover, the role of the interlocutors in the construction of one’s identity should also be considered. It is the interlocutor’s understanding of how language acts, and encoded stances in linguistic practices convey socially recognized resources for structuring particular identities. Membership in a social group, whether it be in a distinct language community or distinct social group within a language community, depends on members’ knowledge of local conventions for building social identities through act and stance display. Speakers use linguistic structures, linguistic features and labels, and variable expressions to constitute their membership affiliation. They acquire, construct, and express different social roles through verbal practices associated with stance and social action recognized as such within the speech community. It is important to mention here also that speakers’ language choices often spontaneously shape language-based negative attitudes expressed towards certain linguistic practices and their users.

1.2 The Phrase *бpам* (‘brother’)

The research on the phrase *бpам* (‘brother’) illustrates a typical case of age grading in language use (Labov, 2001; Tagliamonte, 2016), where a linguistic form becomes associated with a particular generational cohort—in this case, predominantly adolescents and young adults. This case reflects how a term initially rooted in kinship semantics undergoes a pragmatic shift, evolving into a variable stance indexical that expresses solidarity, familiarity, emotional expressivity, and, at times, subcultural or gendered identity. As such, *бpам* exemplifies how youth language practices not only innovate lexicon but also reconfigure social meanings attached to everyday speech, making the term a dynamic marker of in-group affiliation and social positioning. The rapid development of the term as a marker of identity is recognized by all respondents as a term illustrating a newly developed pragmatic shift that vastly influences speech practices in young adolescent communities. The influence of such rapid spread and qualification of the term as a linguistic phenomenon particularly used by the young generation can be related to the dominant influence of the Anglo-American entertainment industry and pop-culture (film, music, Rhythm and Blues, rap, pop, punk, video games, social media) influence.

The meaning of the term is multilayered, as illustrated by the two definitions below, as presented in the official Bulgarian Language Dictionary:

1. “An address to a like-minded person or ally, used by people connected in a community and united by common interests”
2. “A man – member of a community, group, organization, and stance that shares the same situation, occupation, understandings etc. with the other members”.
(<https://ibl.bas.bg/rbe/lang/bg/>)

These meanings have existed in Bulgarian literature and spoken language for many years, but their use with the innovative meanings mentioned above, apart from its denotative meaning designating one’s sibling, is not so frequent and mostly occurs in the form of vocative address – *бpамкo* [*bratko*] (‘brother’ + vocative suffix [o] – expressing address to a close friend, or like-minded individual). The linguistic situation with *бpам* (‘brother’) in present-day Bulgarian, particularly with youth slang, has been changing. Linguistic practices of young males and females in modern-day Bulgarian speech communities use the term as a means to communicate various stances during their linguistic interactions. This evolving usage reflects broader dynamics within Bulgarian speech communities, where *бpам* has become a marker used to signal affiliation, solidarity, informality, or even

challenge and irony, depending on the context. Crucially, these functions vary across age cohorts, with younger speakers innovating new meanings while older generations often perceive such usage as deviant or symbolic of declining linguistic standards. The term thus operates on multiple sociolinguistic levels: (1) it enables speakers, particularly youth, to negotiate group membership and social identity, (2) it serves as a linguistic resource for expressing alignment or misalignment in interaction, and (3) it invites generational interpretations that reveal tensions over language ideologies, values, and change.

1.3 Goal and Research Questions

The main goal of this study is to examine and showcase the particular use of the Bulgarian kinship term *брат* ('brother') in the slang of young Bulgarian speakers. Specifically, the research investigates how *брат* is perceived and used across diverse age and gender demographics, highlighting its evolving social and pragmatic functions. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. In what ways is this lexical item loaded with diverse functions that facilitate the construction and expression of the speakers' identities?
2. How do speakers use the term to signal affiliation with specific social groups and to express their attitudes toward both in-group and out-group members?

The research is based on a survey conducted with participants spanning multiple age groups and backgrounds, as explained in the Methodology section.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The results were drawn from an anonymous survey. A sample of respondents (N=323) was used, covering the age range of 14–63 (age cohorts 14–17, 17–20, 20–35, 35–69), 6 participants did not disclose their age), with various social and professional statuses, and both males and females. There were 210 female participants (66.46%) and 105 male participants (33.54%), along with 8 individuals whose gender was not specified, as they responded with either "NA" or left the response blank.¹ All informants participated in an online survey conducted from April until May 2023, marking 323 participants – native Bulgarian speakers (277 participants) and non-native Bulgarian speakers (46 participants declared their citizenship of Albania, Azerbaijan, Canada, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Macedonia, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, USA, UK).

The age range of the respondents is 14–63, but the respondents above 28 years of age are limited to 20 respondents, which is not enough to define credible data for large generalizations. Still, the size of the sample provides insights into the attitudes and perceptions of the various generational groups towards the use of the term *брат* ('brother') by teenagers and young adults.

The survey aimed to include speakers from various regions in Bulgaria (including dialect speakers of both large dialectal groups – East Bulgarian dialect group and West Bulgarian dialect group). The survey also invited non-native Bulgarian speakers with limited and more advanced knowledge of Bulgarian language living within the sociocultural Bulgarian environment and acquainted with modern Bulgarian linguistic practices. Non-Bulgarian speakers are international students at the American University in Bulgaria, inhabiting the same linguistic and sociocultural environment – university campus and small-town environment. Non-native Bulgarian participants characterize their proficiency in the Bulgarian language as ranging from A1 to C1 according to their self-assessment.

2.2 Survey Language

The survey was conducted in either Bulgarian or English, contingent upon the participant's language preference. It comprised open-ended questions that prompted respondents to articulate their understanding of the term, engage in self-reflection regarding their linguistic practices and the application of *брат* ('brother'), as well as express their attitudes towards individuals who actively employ this term.

2.3 Extra Question

In addition, a question was included that focused on what the other trending terms marking synonymous or approximate meanings were. These terms are recognized by young individuals as part of their slang, marking again their stance and social identities. The linguistic variants employed in contemporary slang and modern Bulgarian communicative culture are encapsulated in one of the questions in the survey, which explores the alternative forms of address recognized as trendy by the same age cohort of participants. Included below are the findings, all of which are derivatives of the principal form *брат*: *братчето ми* [bratcheto mi], *братче* [bratche], *брат ми* [brat mi], *братан* [bratan], *бро* [bro], *бате* [bate], *братле* [bratle], *братленце* [bratlentse], *браточка* [bratochka], *братушка* [bratushka], *борат* [borat], *брааат* [braaat], *бронанарт* [bronapart], *брок* [bror], *братър* [brother]. The preference of the speakers is for the main form, illustrated by the frequency of *брат* use.

2.4 Follow-up Group Meeting

In addition, a follow-up focus group meeting was conducted with 22 respondents (10 males and 12 females, aged 18–19) for further definition and investigation of their attitude and explanation of the stances communicated through *брат*.

2.5 The Survey Questions

To test attitudes as well as linguistic practices in Bulgaria towards the phrase *брат* and the people using this phrase, a survey titled “The use of *brat* in the speech of young Bulgarian speakers” was held among 323 respondents. It included the following questions on the phrase *брат*:

- How often do you use the term as an address term in your speech? [Multiple times per day / Once per day / Very rare / Never
- What kind of person are you likely to use it to address? [A close friend, like-minded person, with whom I am a member of the same group / Any like-minded person or ally with whom we are connected in a community and united by common interests / Only close kin/relative / I wouldn't use that address to anyone
- Would you use this address to: [a boy / a girl / a close friend (female/male) / acquaintance (female/male) / somebody unfamiliar (female/male) / parent (mother/father) / professor (female/male)]
- What is the purpose for which you are using this term? (Open answer)
- What do you think the use of this word says about you to the person you address? (Open answer)
- How do you perceive people using this word? (Open answer)
- How would you describe people using this term? (Open answer)

Finally, a question asking respondents what the other trending terms marking synonymous or approximate meanings were was added aiming to follow the development of the *брат* term and its use in word or phrase composition of other terms:

- What other words (e.g. *brat mi*, *bratcheto mi*, *bratochka*, *brato*, *pich*, *kopele*, *friend*, *maniac*) would you use in a similar situation/context with the same meaning?

2.6 Analysis

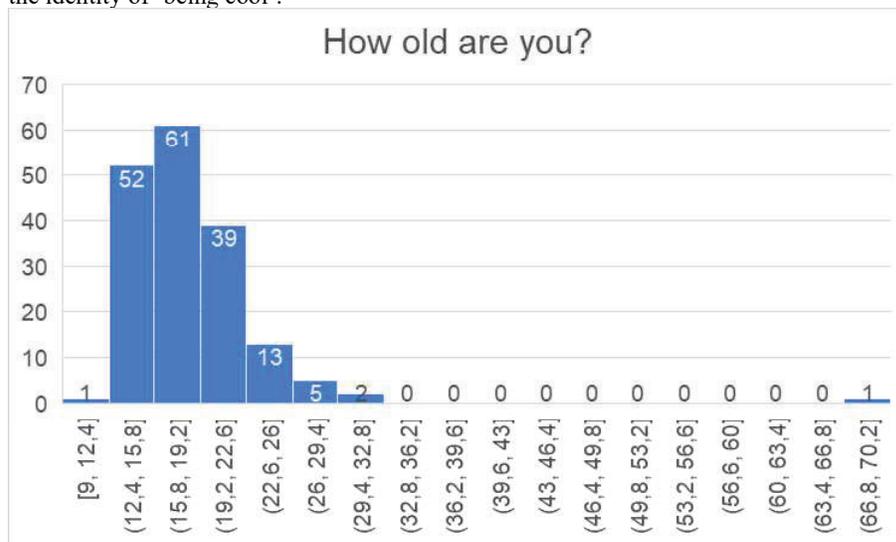
The survey is not committed to be exhaustive, or nationally representative. Rather, it gives a good grounding for continuous research and data collection encompassing various numbers of participants and representatives of different ages, social standings, geographical regions, and ethnic backgrounds. Hence, the data sample presented in this research is only introducing some preliminary and definitive analyses of the indexical associations with the types of stances communicated by the interlocutors and ideologically provoked expectations among speakers due to their culturally constructed linguistic practices.

3. Results

The survey respondents can be clustered into two groups on the basis of their responses. Group 1 are the Active users, and Group 2 are Non-active users. The meanings of these qualifications are on the basis of the self-reported frequency of *ōpam*.

3.1 Group 1: Respondents Using *ōpam* One or More Times a Day ('Active users')

This distinction between respondents is based on the question “How often do you use the term as an address term in your speech?” Group 1 were the participants that chose either “Once a day” or “Multiple times per day”. These respondents will be labeled **Active users** throughout the text. This means that the speakers recognize the term within the semantic domain of the defined meanings proposed in the chart below and use it at least once per day in their speech. The number of respondents in this group is 174 (out of 323) and includes both native (148 respondents) and non-native (26 respondents) Bulgarian speakers. The age range ranged from 9 (only one respondent) to 39. There was only one respondent aged 69 who recognized the use of *ōpam* in their speech. This respondent indicated in their response that they use the term in situations when they purposefully self-construct the identity of ‘being cool’.

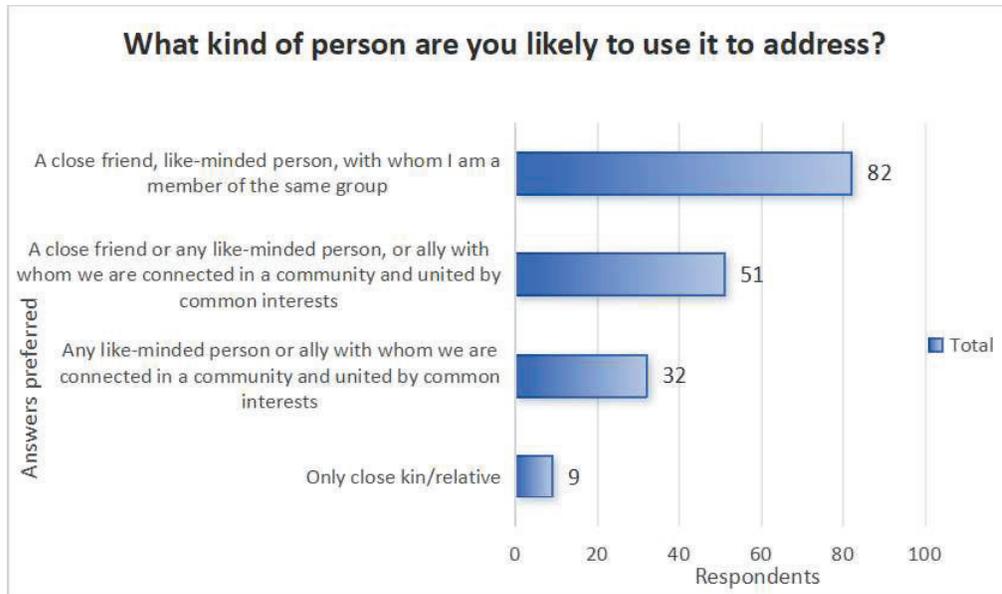


Graph 1. Age distribution of respondents who answered “Once a day” or “Multiple times per day” to “How often do you use the term as an address term in your speech?”.

As can be seen, the group of Active users is aged 13 to 22 (only a few of the active users are aged below 13 and above 22, 4 of the respondents did not provide their age), this illustrates that the claim that the term is a significant part of the slang of young people is plausible. The tendency may be that with age speakers start using it less. Thus, the study contextualizes contemporary data on modern linguistic practice among various age cohorts and illustrates a continuous process of change not only in the discursive practices including *ōpam*, but also in the social evaluation of the term and attitudes of non-active users towards the Active users. Additional studies are required to determine the highest and lowest age at which *ōpam* is part of the lexicon of individuals.

The data presented in the following study draws the trajectory of the age range of active *ōpam* users for the age cohort of 16–20, but is not valid for the lower margin age cohort of 9–10 due to the ethical and legal regulations required for younger generations to be included as research subjects.

Below are the responses of Group 1 to questions measuring pragmatic and social functions. Graph 2 shows the responses of Group 1 on the degree of like-mindedness stance.

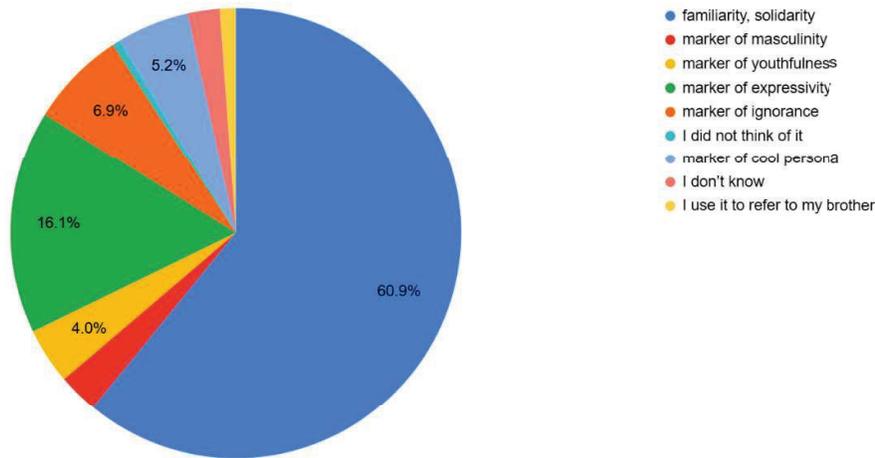


Graph 2. Like-mindedness as measured among Group 1 respondents.

This chart and survey question, “What kind of person are you likely to use it (*ōpam*) to address?”, tests the **perceived social scope and indexical meaning of the address term** *ōpam* in respondents’ everyday speech. The responses reveal how participants define the social boundaries of the term and what types of relationships or identities it pragmatically marks. These answers give us important information about the additional connotative meanings assigned to the term *ōpam* apart from the denotative meaning ‘close relative from one’s personal bloodline’. The term, when used in an informal conversation by the speaker to the addressee, indexes the respondents’ associations located in the semantic domain of the term linked to ‘a like-minded individual’ or the respondents are most likely to address interlocutors that they perceive as close friends, and part of the same like-minded group. 82 respondents say they use *ōpam* for “A close friend, like-minded person, with whom I am a member of the same group”. This suggests that *ōpam* has strong in-group indexicality. The term has become a marker of peer solidarity, shared values, and group membership, rather than kinship. 51 respondents say they would use it for any like-minded person or ally. This indicates a broader but still ideologically bounded usage, where *ōpam* marks affiliation, community, or like-minded identity. It shows *ōpam* as a flexible resource for aligning with others beyond intimate circles. 32 respondents choose even less intimate definitions, using *ōpam* for “any like-minded person or ally united by common interests”. This points to the ideological extension of the term, where it can mark solidarity even among acquaintances or strangers, as long as there is a sense of unity or common cause. By contrast, only 9 respondents reserved the term for actual kin or relatives, indicating a diminished role for its original familial meaning in everyday communication in the context of the survey. One of the respondents did not mark any of these answers.

Graph 3 shows stances indexed by *ōpam* reported by the Active users of the term (both male and female). One open-ended item asked participants to reflect on their use of particular forms of address: “What is the purpose of using this address in your speech? What do you think the word says about you to the person you address?”. Participants were asked to explain the pragmatic intent and social meaning behind their choice of address terms, specifically how such usage might reflect aspects of their identity or relationship with the interlocutor. The results are illustrated in Graph 3 (both male and female).

What is the purpose you are using this address in your speech?
 What do you think the use of this word says about you to the person you address?

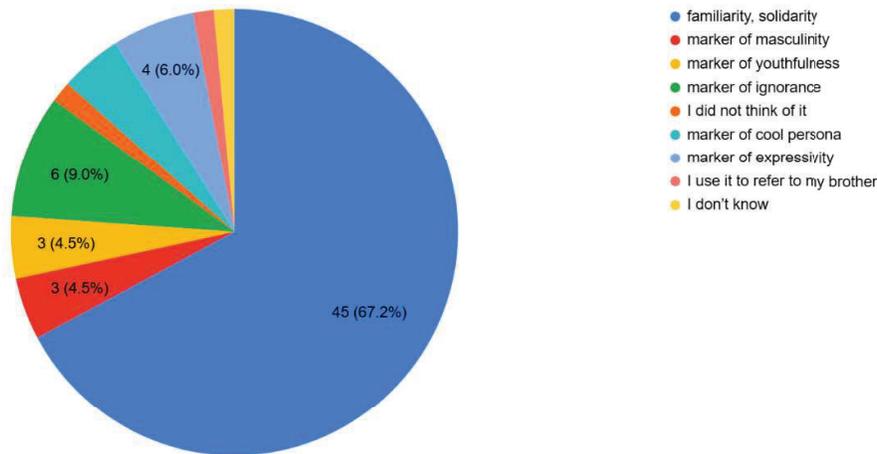


Graph 3. Stances indexed by *brother* reported by the Active users of the term (both male and female)

The analysis of the responses evaluating expressions with *brother* ('brother') proposes that it indexes the following stances: *familiarity, solidarity* (60.9%), *expressivity* (discourse marker of emotional expressiveness) (16.1%), *marker of a cool persona* (5.2%), *marker of ignorance* (6.9%), *marker of masculinity* (2.9%), *marker of youthfulness* (4.0%). Thus, the dominant stance communicated using the term *brother* in this group is *familiarity, solidarity, and expressivity*.

To explore potential gender-based differences in stance-taking, responses to the same questions, mentioned above, were examined separately for male and female participants. The thematic distributions according to male respondents are presented in Graph 4.

What is the purpose you are using this address in your speech?
 What do you think the use of this word says about you to the person you address?



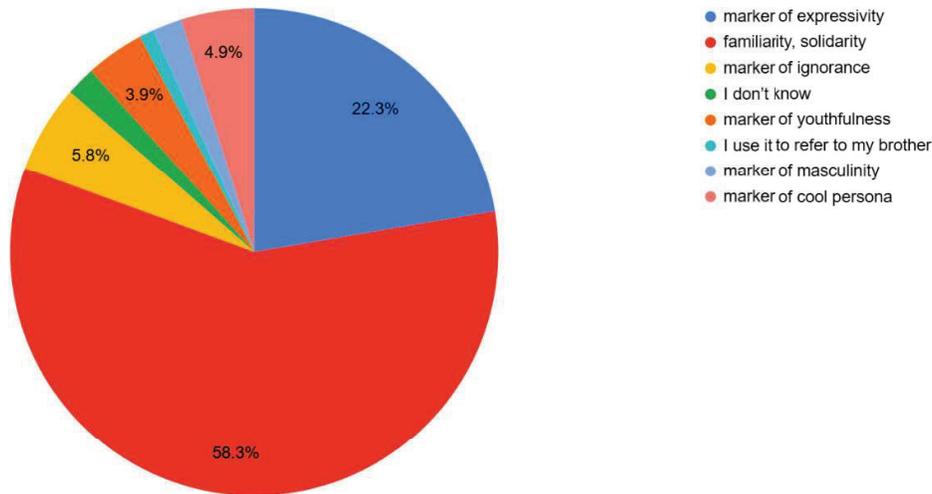
Graph 4. Stances indexed by *brother* term (male respondents)

67.2 % of the male respondents use *brother* to communicate *familiarity, solidarity*; for 9.0% it is a marker of *expressivity* (unedicated person); for 6.0% *brother* is perceived as a discourse marker communicating *expressivity*; 4.5% communicated a stance of a *cool persona*; 4.5 % communicated a stance of *youthfulness*; and 4.5% communicated a stance of *masculinity*, the other percentages are distributed among responses 'I don't know' and 'I use it to refer to my brother only' but these are minor percentages that fall on the margins between the two groups – the active users of *brother* and non-users.

Graph 5 shows the results for the female participants.

What is the purpose you are using this address in your speech?

What do you think the use of this word says about you to the person you address?



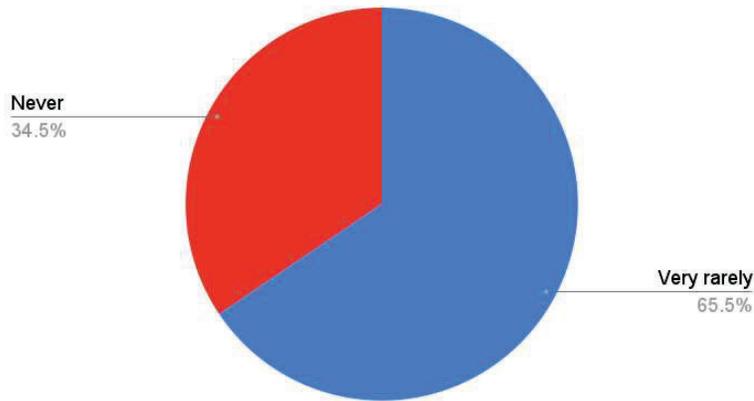
Graph 5. Stances indexed by *bepam* term (female respondents)

Female respondents predominantly framed their use of the term *bepam* as a marker of *familiarity, solidarity* (58.3%), with a notable portion also viewing it as a marker of *expressivity* (22.3%). The increase in female Active users, and their perception of the term as a marker of *expressivity*, indicates emotional involvement or performative language use. This aligns with the pragmatic role of the address term in signaling stance and emotion which is notably more in the group of female respondents. Interestingly, only a few respondents identify *bepam* as a marker of *masculinity, youthfulness*, or a *cool persona*, which may suggest that female users do not strongly associate the term with gender identity despite its male semantic and grammatical origins. This could be a process of pragmatic shift *bepam* may be undergoing where gendered meanings fade in favor of social functions like solidarity reflecting dynamic stance-taking and identity construction in discourse. Notably, a very small number of female respondents described *bepam* as a marker of *ignorance*. These responses might reveal that the term itself is positively evaluated as a legitimate and expressive marker and not necessarily express negative attitudes toward its active users both male and female – an attitude and negative judgment which is visible within the responses of the second group of respondents.

3.2 Group 2 – Respondents Using *bepam* Very Rarely or Never ('non-active users')

The cohort comprised 148 respondents, demographically represented as follows: native Bulgarian speakers (128 participants) and non-native Bulgarian speakers (20 participants), with a gender distribution of male (38 participants) and female (106 participants), and 4 unspecified participants. The results for both genders are in Graph 6.

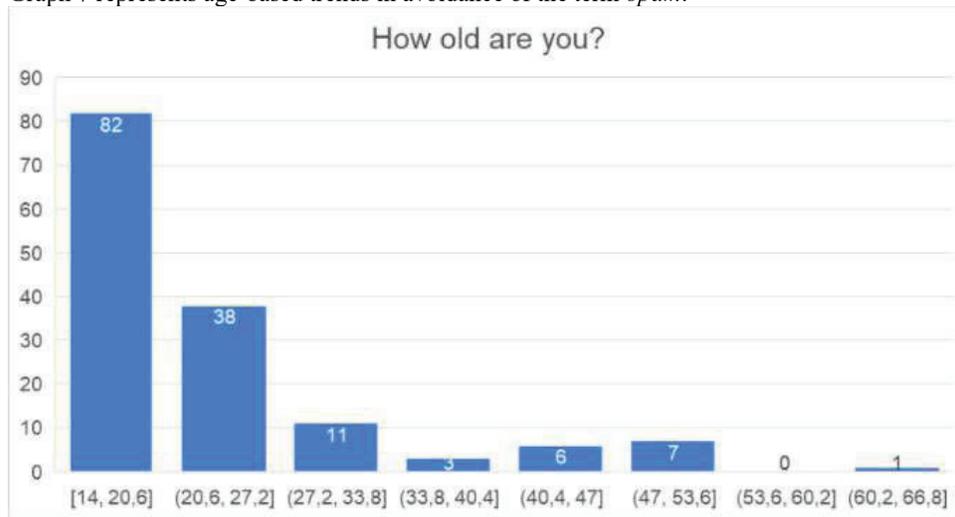
How often do you use the term as an address term?



Graph 6. Distribution of responses “Very rarely”, “Never”

Graph 6 represents the distribution of the answers of “Very rarely” – 65.5% (68 respondents), and “Never” – 34.5% (38 participants).

Graph 7 represents age-based trends in avoidance of the term *ḡpam*.

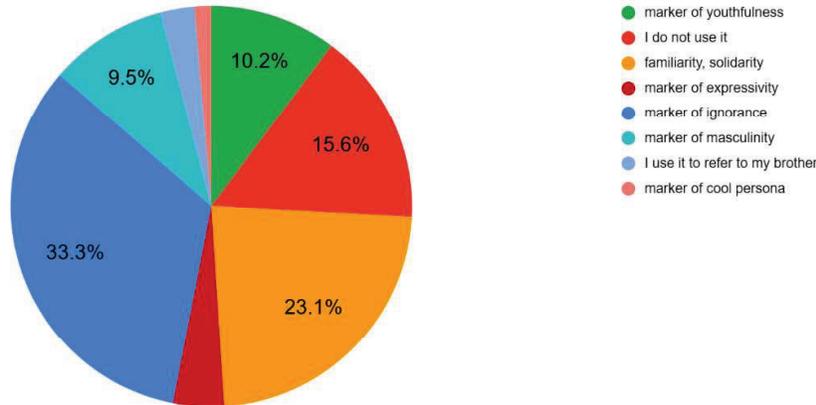


Graph 7. Age distribution of Group 2 (Non-active users)

Avoidance of *ḡpam* spans multiple age groups, showing that non-use is not exclusive to older or younger speakers. However, the largest group of non-users comes from youth aged 14–20, which is surprising given that youth are often the most innovative with slang and address terms. It should also be mentioned here that this cohort marked their response not as “Never” (use the term in my communication), but as “Very rarely”, which might suggest sociolinguistic distancing. Some young speakers may intentionally avoid *ḡpam* to reject what they perceive as inauthentic, overused, or stereotypical language which is associated with specific subcultures or street language. The group of respondents not using *ḡpam* (Non-active users) includes not only adolescents and young adults but also the majority of respondents aged above 22, as well as all senior participants in the survey. The age distribution of respondents who reported “Never” or “Very rarely” using the term reveals nuanced patterns when considered alongside gender and stance data. This group of participants connects the application of the term with individuals of a specific age demographic. In their responses to open-ended questions, they express that they are not active users and tend to utilize *ḡpam* “Very rarely” or “Never”; instead, they adopt it only occasionally, regarding it as unsuitable within their communicative practices.

The graphs below show the results for social and pragmatic meaning of the term *ḡpam* as reported by the Non-active users of the term (both males and females). Graph 8 represents stances assigned to the term, including its pragmatic and social functions.

What is the purpose you are using this address in your speech?
 What do you think the use of this word says about you to the person you address?



Graph 8. Stances assigned to the term, its pragmatic and social functions.

Among respondents who report minimal or no use of the term *ḡpam*, perceptions of its social meaning reveal significant divergence. Majority of respondents (33.3%) categorize it as a *marker of ignorance*, indicating a strong negative stance toward its use. However, nearly a quarter (23.1%) acknowledge its function as a *marker of familiarity and solidarity*. Another significant difference is the appearance of the ‘I do not use it’ response, which accounts for 15.6%, an observable increase of percentage recognizing the term as a *marker of youthfulness* (10.2%), and *marker of masculinity* (9.5%), and only 4.4% perceive it as a *marker of expressivity*. This is a significantly different picture of perceptions of *ḡpam* among non-active users and their associations and characteristics assigned to the Active users of the term.

3.3 Examples of open answer questions “How do you perceive people using this word? How would you describe them?”

As mentioned above, some of the questions included in the survey are open-answer questions. The questions “How do you perceive people using this word? How would you describe them?” asked participants not to comment on their own use of the term, but on how they interpret others’ use of the term. That is, what language ideology is implied by certain forms of speech and what they reveal about the speakers (Silverstein, 1993).

Table 1. Some answers to the question ‘How do you perceive people using this word?’ and ‘How would you describe them?’

Respondents/age	Answer
Female, 49	<i>they (users of ḡpam) are ignorant, possessing low level of education</i>
Female, 22	<i>they are uneducated</i>
Male, 28	<i>they are simple-minded, uneducated</i>
Female, 50	<i>individuals with poor language command</i>
Male, 22	<i>These people do not use the full potential of their language skills and feel more comfortable to use slang because they do not have vast knowledge of the world. These people use these label terms because of their frequent communication in informal situations. These are more often young adults and adolescents which use these words in their environment and mostly to imitate and associate with other like-minded individuals</i>
Female, 26	<i>When overused, I would identify this word as a viral word and would not consider the person using it being polite or well-educated</i>
Male, 35	<i>poor language capacity</i>

4. Discussion

The findings from this study reveal (although that the number of respondents does not provide sufficient data for generalizations validated by a large sample of respondents from various age cohorts) that the Bulgarian address term *бpам* ('brother') functions as a stance indexical (Du Bois, 2007), whose social meaning is highly sensitive to age, gender, and context. The term is not simply a lexical item used to denote kinship, but a linguistic resource for enacting and negotiating social identity, particularly among young speakers. As the survey data demonstrate, *бpам* operates within an indexical field (Eckert, 2008) encompassing meanings of solidarity, expressivity, masculinity, and subcultural in-group membership affiliation. Respondents use or avoid the term not only to communicate interpersonal relationships but also to position themselves within broader ideological landscapes of youth language, gender norms, and linguistic credibility.

For Active users (as presented in Group 1), predominantly adolescents and young adults aged 14–22, *бpам* indexes *solidarity*, *familiarity*, and *emotional expressivity*. These respondents demonstrate a high degree of metapragmatic awareness (Silverstein, 1993), as they are not only aware of how the term functions but also articulate how it reflects their own identity and social stance. Female respondents, for example, were more likely to view *бpам* as a marker of *expressivity* rather than *masculinity*, suggesting a pragmatic shift where the term's gendered connotations are alternated in favor of its role in peer bonding and informal discourse. This shift is consistent with broader processes of stance recontextualization (Agha, 2007), in which linguistic forms are re-evaluated and reassigned social meanings by specific speech communities.

However, gender remains a prominent ideological boundary in how *бpам* is perceived. A notable portion of respondents, particularly among the non-active users in Group 2, assign the term a stance of masculinity, often disapproving of its use by female speakers. While female users tend to appropriate *бpам* for solidarity or emotional expressivity (as in expressions "*Ох, бpам!*", "*Смyза, бe, бpамче!*"), such usage is not always socially accepted. Listeners, especially male respondents, are more likely to perceive this as inauthentic or linguistically inappropriate for women. As one male respondent (age 18) noted: "*If I hear a girl address another girl with бpам, it's ugly—not elegant for girls.*" A female respondent (age 20) seconded this, stating: "*I would perceive it as okay, if it's used toward a boy, but for girls, it's strange.*" These perceptions reflect gendered language ideologies (Ochs, 1992) that regulate not only the appropriateness of specific forms but also their acceptability across speaker identities. These ideas give a good ground for further research on the topic.

Moreover, several responses connect the use of *бpам* to performative masculinity and the broader 'batka' cultural stereotype – a Bulgarian subcultural persona associated with hypermasculinity, wealth display, and aggressive style. One respondent (male, age 21) stated: "*I associate people using this word with a stance of toxic masculinity and batka culture.*" This highlights how *бpам*, beyond indexing closeness or informality, can bring up entire ideological models of social behavior and class-coded identity (Bourdieu, 1991). When used by certain male speakers, the term becomes a symbolic marker of exaggerated masculinity and social dominance, further complicating its evaluative field. Another subject yet to be explored in greater depth.

Non-active users (**Group 2 in the survey**), including both older respondents and a notable number of youth, tend to associate *бpам* with *ignorance*, *limited education*, or *in-group alignment*. For the first stance it evokes a negative language ideology (Schieffelin et al., 1998) in which slang is seen as an index of deviance or linguistic deficiency rather than creative expression. As respondent 4 (female, age 50 – Table 1.) noted: "*Individuals with poor language command*".

The rejection of *бpам* by some younger speakers, those who marked "Very rarely" or "Never", is particularly revealing. Rather than indicating unfamiliarity, this stance reflects a deliberate sociolinguistic distancing. These respondents are aware of the term's social salience but choose not to affiliate with the masculinized or performative identity they believe it indexes. While others share in their responses that the term suggests the meaning of low prestige language and language limitation, but prefer it because of the stance of solidarity expression. As one of the respondents reports: "*At first, I thought this word as a parasite word, but after I started to use it and apply it as a sign of familiarity, solidarity. As a representative of the male sex, I like other man to address me with бpам, because it makes me feel that they want to cut the distance when in conversation.*"⁴ Such distancing is itself a stance act, used to project alternative forms of identity, linguistic competence, or social belonging (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Moreover, responses to the open-ended questions demonstrate that listeners not only interpret the use of *бpам* as ideologically loaded but also evaluate the speakers themselves in terms of competence, background, or alignment with particular social groups. This is in agreement with Ochs's (1992, 1993) arguments about how linguistic forms index social meanings indirectly, via their association with acts and stances. In this study, *бpам* functions as a symbolically strong form, subject to both positive reappropriation by young speakers and disapproval by others. The coexistence of these different stances underscores how linguistic forms can serve as

sites of ideological group action, where meanings are negotiated through everyday interactions and language choices (Bourdieu, 1991).

Finally, the variety of neologisms and compound forms derived from *брат* (e.g., *братле*, *братан*, *братушка*, *бро*, *брадър*) further illustrates the productive creativity and indexical flexibility of the term in youth discourse. These lexical innovations reaffirm *брат*'s central role in a generational style repertoire, where address terms serve not only referential functions but also perform identity work (Bucholtz, 1999b; Tagliamonte, 2016). While the term's popularity may be temporally bounded, its current status within Bulgarian youth culture reflects broader dynamics of language change, stance-taking, and the ideological regulation of speech. It serves as a marker of identity negotiation and is recognized by not only Bulgarian native speakers, but also by non-native speakers as marked in the survey.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the shifting social and pragmatic functions of the Bulgarian term *брат* ('brother') among speakers of different ages and genders, even representatives of non-native Bulgarian speakers, although in a limited number. The findings show that *брат* serves as a stance indexical, most actively used by youth to express *solidarity*, *expressivity*, and *in-group affiliation*. Female speakers often reframe it as emotionally expressive, though this use is sometimes met with negative judgment. In contrast, many Non-active users associate the term with ignorance, in some cases hypermasculinity, particularly in connection with the *batka* Bulgarian subcultural stereotype. These different evaluations highlight how *брат* functions not just as an address term but as a marker of social positioning, identity construction and communication of identity, and ideological alignment. While the study offers valuable insights into the topic, its sample of 323 participants is not nationally representative, particularly for older age groups. Future research should build on these findings with larger, more diverse samples and qualitative methods to deepen our understanding of how youth address terms mediate identity, stance, and linguistic norms in contemporary Bulgarian society.

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