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The Sociolinguistic Features of Gangster Argot in *the Godfather*

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Abstract- Modern linguists reached an agreement on the argument that language capability makes human species unique among all group-living species on the planet, so it can be hypothesized that a language could not survive if it were disconnected from interpersonal relations. Despite a well entrenched consensus on language equality among modern linguists, there is an intangible pyramid of languages due to linguistic discrimination. Gangster argot, which is subjected to a subliminal "censorship" from the vast majority of people, has seldom been considered as a decent and valuable topic in the field of modern linguistic studies. In view that *The Godfather* is exemplary of the way Mafia members speak in real-life scenarios, this novel is sampled as an optimal literary discourse to study what makes gangster argot different from ordinary speech. On the basis of literary specimens excerpted from the novel, this research concludes that gangster argot, which juxtaposes conciseness with confidentiality, is characteristic of adaptive resilience, absorptive capacity, and provocative rhetoric.

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The Sociolinguistic Features of Gangster Argot in *the Godfather*

Zheng Yang

- Modern linguists reached an agreement on the argument that language capability makes human species unique among all group-living species on the planet, so it can be hypothesized that a language could not survive if it were disconnected from interpersonal relations. Despite a well entrenched consensus on language equality among modern linguists, there is an intangible pyramid of languages due to linguistic discrimination. Gangster argot, which is subjected to a subliminal "censorship" from the vast majority of people, has seldom been considered as a decent and valuable topic in the field of modern linguistic studies. In view that *The Godfather* is exemplary of the way Mafia members speak in real-life scenarios,this novel is sampled as an optimal literary discourse to study what makes gangster argot different from ordinary speech. On the basis of literary specimens excerpted from the novel, this research concludes that gangster argot, which juxtaposes conciseness with confidentiality, is characteristic of adaptive resilience, absorptive capacity, and provocative rhetoric.

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I. Introduction

Due to the deepening stratification of social classes, language, other than a tool used for communication, is increasingly endowed with a range of new roles in social life. To be specific, social groups are not necessarily made up of people of the same or similar origin and background, and an individual is much more likely to be identified with whom he or she serves through a commonly shared speech code. For instance, the acquisition of the French language constitutes one of the mandatory "initiations" which every new recruit of the French Foreign Legion must go through. In response to the foregrounded social functions of language, sociolinguists make a further attempt to consider language against the background of human development and social changes. They conclude that language can function as a demarcation line within which people of the same social identity are gathered into a homogeneous group.

Language, like human body, undergoes a constant change in reaction to the metamorphosis of outer environment. The metabolic status of a language can sometimes reveal the subtle change of social milieu and public tolerance. For example, after the Norman conquest of England, French became the language of the nobility and higher classes, whereas the general population persisted in using English as their predominant language. The coexistence of French and English in one society foregrounds expanding social inequality in England during that period.

Apart from a variety of independent languages categorized in accordance with linguistic features, there are many other variants subordinate to a single language on account of social, political, religious, economic, cultural, and anthropological factors. These sub-languages, such as idiolect, age dialect, gender dialect, and class dialect, are linguistically defined as sociolects.

In the field of modern linguistic studies dominated by English speaking researchers, a regional dialect is discriminated from a language in the principle of mutual intelligibility. In this sense, sociolects resulting from different social identities are estimated to create fewer obstacles than regional dialects do in the context of interpersonal communication. Although sociolects might be much more limited in the degree to which they can be understood than regional dialects, psychological barriers generated by them are no less problematic than the obstacle of verbal exchange.

Sociolects can be a more efficacious hint to one's identity awareness because they partly reflect the way an individual is indoctrinated with a collective sense of pride and commitment. An excessive attention to differences between two sociolects is very likely to trigger off mistrust and inequality in a pluralistic community. For example, cockney English spoken by the working class Londoners in the East End is a long held laughingstock of the upper class residing in the West End.

Despite their limited sphere of influence, rare languages and dialects can fulfill their secrecy on special occasions. The film *Windtalkers* tells an unknown story about how Navajo code was used as a natural mediator for the exchange of military intelligence during WWII. Likewise, the Wenzhou dialect, which is only reserved to a small population of inhabitants along the southeastern coast of China, was used in the same way during the Sino-Vietnamese War.

Gangster argot, like rare languages and dialects, is practically inaccessible to outsiders. Those without access to a closely knit gangster clan are prohibited from the mastery of this cryptic slang. It is

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depicted in Hugo's novel *Notre Dame de Paris* that a bard barely survives from being lynched because he inadvertently intrudes into the forbidden domain of the Kingdom of Argot. What exposes his identity is exactly his inability to speak like people around him.

While gangster argot can function as a camouflage which handicaps outsiders from infiltration, it also exerts a pivotal role in instilling the awareness of discipline and authority into newcomers. In the early period of human society, group leaders resorted to totem, religious faith, enchantment, and other forms of collective rituals to stimulate commitment and obedience among in-group members. A well-structured and heterogeneous organization like the Mafia is in great need of such catalysts as gangster argot to its integrity and solidarity. Yet, a rapid growth in information technology makes it inevitable for the segments of gangster argot to be blended into mainstream languages, and ordinary people are supposed to be steadfastly cautious about when and where gangster argot can be put into use.

II. Literature Review: Thieves' Cant——a Prelude to Gangster Argot

Some social dialects are practically susceptible to antipathy and bias because their speakers or the places where they are spoken are regarded inferior in some ways. (Downes, 47) Gangster argot came into being and then developed into a mature sociolect in reaction to the escalation of lawbreaking behaviors and criminal crimes. Prior to the emergence of gang conglomerations, there was a nascent paradigm of criminal cant, namely, thieves' cant. Since most of petty law breakers are loosely connected, their esoteric slang appeared comparatively desultory. Victor Hugo, a monumental titan in the field of French literature, made himself known as one of the few forerunners in doing research on argot. Early in the 19th century, Hugo intentionally discussed on how the slang develops into a cohesive power of gangster groups in Part 4, Book 7 of *Les Misérables*. Thieves' cant can also be tremendously found in Picaresque novels published over the 18th and 19th centuries, such as *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* writtenby Henry Fielding and *David Copperfield, Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens. Euphemisms are devised to mollify potential offense engendered by a few indecent and obscene topics such as death, senility, sexuality, and racism. Thieves' cant, which are intended to replace some commonly used lexical items with their cryptic counterparts (Lyons, 54), can be considered as an anomaly of euphemisms. However, it should not be neglected that thieves' cant mainly serves to conceal crimes rather than to weaken insidious insults.

In contrast to euphemisms, thieves' cant is much lower in the degree of politeness and civility than a standard language. Take substitutes for death and death penalty in thieves' cant as an example, thieves devised such strongly sardonic words as *earth bath*, *eternity box*, *wooden surcoat*, *twisted*, *scraggered*, *stretching*, *nubbing*, *dangle*, *jammed*, and *trining* to express their contempt for death and lessen their burden of guilty conscience.

Since money plays an essential role in the illegal activities of thieves, many money related cant words were popular with thieves, such as *blunt*, *bustle*, *crop*, *dust*, *ribband*, *Kings pictures*, and *yellow boy*. More specific words were created to differentiate the value of currencies, for example, *bob*, *twelver*, and *borde* all refer to a shilling; *duce* is equivalent to a twopence; *crook* is tantamount to a sixpence. (Seboek, 75)

Phrases such as *bandog*, *philistine*, *catch pole*, *fool finder*, and *shoulder clapper* were used to taunt those in charge of law enforcement, namely, the perennial predators of thieves. As for different types of crimes, thieves also created a range of expressions which integrate witty humor with the function of camouflage, for example, the phrase "dive to pocket" carries the meaning of stealing money; the phrase "heave a couch" is synonymous with robbing a house. There are more phrases in thieves' cant to describe the different ways of theft, for instance,the phrase "black art" indicates the skill of picking locks; *mill a glaze* refers to breaking a window. An inclination for witticism finds expression in phrases such as *city college*, *block houses*, *boarding school*, and *sheriff's hotel*, whereas phrases such as *navy office*, *bulwark*, and *stone tavern* tend to be ambiguously pejorative.

III. The Characteristics of the Gangster Argot in *the Godfather*

The Godfather written by Mario Puzo, which is well acclaimed as an epoch-making icon in the category of crime fictions, tells a suspenseful story about a hegemonic gangster family in the U.S. The Mafia, deeply rooted in Sicilian agrarian civilizations, retains the rustic traditions of the Italian Mafia clans whilst absorbing the unsophisticated and aggressive traits of the North American Continent. (Wolfman, 41) Vito Corleone, head of this mythologized family, is worshiped as the Don. The Don itself is a commonly heard example of argot. The centralization of the Don's power and autocracy fosters his Mafia family into a hierarchical organization which governs subordinate consiglieres, underbosses, capos, and soldiers.

Vito Corleone is described as a sophisticated dictator who wields his unbridled powers randomly irrespective of law and order. He resorts to his personal judgment to decide who is good and evil, but he even does not realize that his "self-righteous" justice is indeed a transgression against civil rights.

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The Don beguiles himself with the condescending feeling that people who he offers help to shall be reverently succumbed to him. He is always much more concerned about his reputation than how much he can earn profitably. For instance, the Don never allows his followers and himself to be involved in drug business in spite of a potentially huge profit from it. His idiosyncratic masculinity reinforces his authority among his disciples and friends, yet the personality of being obdurate and commanding incurs hostility and rancor from his enemies.

The novel focuses upon the thrilling and soul-stirring handover of Don Corleone's reign within the Don family, during which wickedness beyond the rule of law and iniquity hidden in the nature of criminals are unfolded layer by layer. In the midst of twists and turns, the scepter of the Don is tortuously handed down to a new generation. The novel not only boasts of its incisive insight into the American Mafia, but also provides a wealth of information for an in-depth insight into gangster argot.

a) Adaptive Resilience

Criminal clans like the Mafia are widely involved in the complexity of social relationships. The Mafia members, who are considered susceptible to seductions, attach great importance to authoritarianism and discipline. Anyone who fails to obey orders or defects from his organization is subjected to a severe retribution. In comparison with thieves' cant randomly used by petty outlaws, gangster argot as portrayed in *The Godfather* tends to be more logically organized and systematically coherent. Although gangster argot is necessarily tinged with the dark side of human nature, the Mafia members are anything but uninhibited when speaking of some controversial topics. For example, the writer works out a decent phrase "house of ill fame" (Puzo, 12) to insinuate the place where prostitution occurs. When Sollozzo seeks for a collaboration with the Don family on drug dealing, Sonny tentatively reveals his support for Sollozzo's suggestion by claiming, "There is a lot of money in that white powder". (Puzo, 64) The use of the "white powder" is expressive of the speaker's cunning personality. In addition to the "white powder", the word "narcotic" is also often used to refer to drugs in gangster dialogues over the issue of drug dealings. "I think narcotics is the coming thing." (Puzo, 87) In comparison with poppy, heroin, and morphine, "narcotic" sounds more like a medical term so that the negativity of drugs are diluted imperceptibly.

After Michael is heavily beaten by Captain McCluskey in a hospital due to his desperate resistance to being arrested, the writer uses the phrase "bone fragments" to describe how severely Michael is wounded. "They have to dig some bone fragments out of your gums." (Puzo, 120) In this sentence, the "bone fragments", which literally stand for broken teeth, imply that Michael suffers from a severe injury in a pejorative tone.

b) Absorptive Capacity

A Mafia family under the rule of the Don has a lot in common with a family enterprise and a military troop. Mafia members loan lots of words from business and military men to develop their argot.

(1) "Sonny has an inside man." (Puzo, 120)
(2) "The ferret-faced button man was watching him intently." (Puzo, 98)
(3) "Your boss is dead." (Puzo, 80)
(4) "Stay negotiation over the phone or by messenger with Sollozzo." (Puzo, 91)
(5) "These guys over there must be cops." (Puzo, 14)
(6) "Those guys are FBI men." (Puzo, 15)

The "inside man" in sentence (1) discloses that Sonny stealthily bribes a detective in command to support him. The "button man" in sentence (2) is a very authentic word to describe those who are resigned to a superior in a gangster clan. The "boss" in sentence (3), which is a loan word from commercial vocabulary, makes the Don's authority more visualized. The word "messenger" in sentence (4), rather than a postman or courier, often works as an unctuous mediator when tensions between different gangster families become irreconcilable. The "cops" and "FBI men" in sentences (5) and (6) are absorbed in ordinary speech and even put into use in news reports.

Cant words and phrases are sometimes hard to understand because they largely overlap with common languages.

(7) "Pretty soon you'll want me to put up my dukes." (Puzo, 85)
(8) "I hope we can straighten everything out." (Puzo, 147)
(9) "I'd guess he has an ace up his sleeve." (Puzo, 109)
(10) "I slipped and fell." (Puzo, 120)
(11) "Your friend is in trouble and his word don't go this far west anymore." (Puzo, 286)

The word "duke" in sentence (7) literally stands for a nobleman of the highest rank outside a royal family, but gangsters give it a new meaning, namely, hand or fist. Sonny threatens to teach his brother Mike a lesson by saying "put up my dukes". The phrase "straighten out" in sentence (8) refers to putting everything in order or settling all problems perfectly. Those who are keen on poker games should find it easy to understand the implied meaning of sentence (9). Someone who likes to hide an ace when playing cards is cunning and deceptive. Sentence (10) is Mike's subterfuge to conceal the fact that he has a fight with Captain McCluskey when he attempts to break away from the arrest at the hospital. The word "far west" in sentence (11) can be understood as a parody of the geographical term "the Far East". The writer makes a

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coinage of this new word to accentuate the speaker's hostility toward the Don's unchallenged authority.

c) Provocative Rhetoric

The wide use of rhetorical skills enhances the power of gangster argot in terms of provocation and emotional appeals.

(12) "The Don is still getting the stuff in the tubes, no food, so we don't have to worry about the kitchen." (Puzo, 110)

The word "kitchen", used as a metonymy, is evocative of food supply. As a survivor from a failed assassination, the Don is receiving a medical care in hospital, and he is unable to take foods. By saying this, the speaker assures that there is no need to worry about the possibility that assassins might put poisons in foods prepared for the Don.

(13) "We must tread on each other's corns." (Puzo, 235)

The word "corn" in sentence (13) refers to conflicting interest groups, indicating that both parties have to make a compromise to end a feud.

(14) "It was the first time that he realized the long arm of the Don." (Puzo, 301)

The "long arm" in sentence (14) is a vivid metonymy which compares the hegemony of the Don family into man's bodily part.

(15) "I know you're not the muscle end of the family" (Puzo, 80)

(16) "The Corleone Family don't have that much muscle anymore." (Puzo, 231)

Similarly, the word "muscle" in the above two sentences is used as a metonomy to describe somebody's authoritarian position.

(17) "We'll make to put a tail on Mike." (Puzo,49)

The "tail" in sentence (17) is synonymous with someone dispatched to trail and protect Mike surreptitiously.

(18) "Sollozo is dead meat." (Puzo, 88)

The "dead meat" is metaphorically expressive of Sollozzo's vulnerability to rancor and anger.

(19) "Sollozo must have given him a fortune for openers and promised him the moon to come." (Puzo, 115)

(20) "He was a hair away from death." (Puzo, 58)

The above two sentences are typical examples of hyperbole or overstatement. In sentence (19), the speaker exaggerates that the Captain gains a large profit from Sollozzo's bribery. The word "hair" in sentence (20) indicates a lucky survival from a failed assassination.

(21) "Who do I give this job to?" (Puzo, 19)

At Connie Corleone's wedding, the dependents of the Don family come to seek for a vengeful support from the Don. After accepting their requests, the Don discusses with his associates about who will be sent to carry out his promised mission. The writer intentionally understates this retaliatory revenge by using the word "job", which reflects the Don's cynical and sophisticated attitude toward his checkered gangster career.

(22) "Did you do the job on Sollozzo?" (Puzo, 143)
(23) "Mike is doing the job on her" (Puzo, 43)

It can be deciphered from the novel that the phrase "do the job" has dual meanings. Sentence (23) shows Clemenza's grievance against Michael for his obsession with Kay (Michael's girlfriend) without caring about family affairs, but the phrase "do the job on Sollozzo" in sentence (22) apparently has nothing to do with a romantic flirtation.

d) The Juxtaposition of Conciseness and Confidentiality

Gangster argot optimizes the art of secrecy without losing its conciseness. Most of the time, mafia members are required to respond to orders promptly and to undertake tasks which must not be discerned by outsiders, so they must be good at coordinating clarity with secrecy in their speech code to ensure the efficiency and confidentiality of information exchange. The fact that the Mafia members are often involved in murder cases spawns many substitutions for killing:

(24) "He was paid off to set the Don up." (Puzo, 87)
(25) "You will save a lot of bloodshed." (Puzo, 81)
(26) "He really took an awful gamble bucking the Don." (Puzo, 82)
(27) "His knocking off the old man is purely business I would go in with him." (Puzo, 87)
(28) "You take care of him?" (Puzo, 106)
(29) "Or maybe he's just being very careful so that our button men won't nail him." (Puzo, 135)
(30) "We have to get Sollozo right away." (Puzo, 124)

In the above sentences, a sequence of phrases are used to refer to assassinations that are commonly heard among gangsters. Phrases such as "blood saving" and "nail someone" in sentences (25) and (29) reflect the ferocity of criminal groups. In contrast, phrases such as "set up", "knocking off", and "bucking someone" sound more implicit and ambiguous without a contextual support. The phrase "take care of" in sentence (28) can be understood as synonymous with teaching someone a lesson, or even more severely, lynching someone to death. Sonny inquires Clemenza (a trustworthy chamberlain of the Don family) about whether Paulie Gatto, whose betrayal leads to the failed assassination of the Don, has been killed privately.

The following sentences demonstrate how criminal organizations in America are secretly operated:

(31) "They will all have clean records." (Puzo, 79)
(32) "What percentage for my family?" (Puzo, 66)
(33) "If Luca sold us out, we're in real trouble." (Puzo, 90)

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(34) "Has Sollozo got the New York police department in his pocket too?" (Puzo, 114)
(35) "I told him I could wrap you around my finger, Sonny." (Puzo, 89)

In sentence (31), the word "record" reveals that gangster clans are fastidious about their newly recruited members' background and history. Sentence (32) is often heard in gangster groups' negotiations over the distribution of interests. Sentences (33) and (34) indicate that betrayal and bribery are severely detrimental to the solidarity of gangster families. The phrase "wrap someone around one's finger" in sentence (35) bring to light Tom Hagen's unchallenged prerogative in the Don family.

The following sentences are vividly descriptive of how the Mafia members transgress against the rule of civil government and how they interfere in governmental affairs such as spying, patrolling, surveillance, bodyguard, and arresting.

(36) "Is the hospital covered?" (Puzo, 90)
(37) "You hold your people in reserve but have them nosing around the city." (Puzo, 91)
(38) "We have the whole area loaded." (Puzo, 91)
(39) "I'm the hunted one." (Puzo, 149)

IV. Conclusion

Gangster argot is often underestimated as a "pollutant" to ordinary speech and a scourge of social violence, campus bullying in particular. An increase in language hybridity provides a possibility to detach gangster argot from its stereotype as a language of violence and obscenity. In spite of being alienated and suppressed by mainstream society, gangster argot undergoes a major change from randomness to maturity. The formation and evolution of gangster argot not only reflects the in-depth stratification of human languages, but also exemplifies man's instinctual demand for belonging and conformity.

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