

# 1 The Sociolinguistic Features of Gangster Argot in the Godfather

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## 6 **Abstract**

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

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20 **Index terms**— gangster argot, the godfather, sociolects, sociolinguistics

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

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

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

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

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

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

56 Gangster argot, like rare languages and dialects, is practically inaccessible to outsiders. Those without access  
 57 to a closely knit gangster clan are prohibited from the mastery of this cryptic slang. It is Year 2017 depicted  
 58 in Hugo's novel *Notre Dame de Paris* that a bard barely survives from being lynched because he inadvertently  
 59 intrudes into the forbidden domain of the Kingdom of Argot. What exposes his identity is exactly his inability  
 60 to speak like people around him.

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

## 69 1 II.

70 Literature Review: Thieves' Cant—a Prelude to Gangster Argot Some social dialects are practically susceptible  
 71 to antipathy and bias because their speakers or the places where they are spoken are regarded inferior in some  
 72 ways. ??Downes, ??7) Gangster argot came into being and then developed into a mature sociolect in reaction  
 73 to the escalation of lawbreaking behaviors and criminal crimes. Prior to the emergence of gang conglomerations,  
 74 there was a nascent paradigm of criminal cant, namely, thieves' cant. Since most of petty law breakers are loosely  
 75 connected, their esoteric slang appeared comparatively desultory. Victor Hugo, a monumental titan in the field  
 76 of French literature, made himself known as one of the few forerunners in doing research on argot. Early in the  
 77 19 th century, Hugo intentionally discussed on how the slang develops into a cohesive power of gangster groups in  
 78 Part 4, Book 7 of *Les Misérables*. Thieves' cant can also be tremendously found in Picaresque novels published  
 79 over the 18 th and 19 th centuries, such as *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* written by Henry Fielding and  
 80 *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens.

81 Euphemisms are devised to mollify potential offense engendered by a few indecent and obscene topics such as  
 82 death, senility, sexuality, and racism. Thieves' cant, which are intended to replace some commonly used lexical  
 83 items with their cryptic counterparts ??Lyons, ??4), can be considered as an anomaly of euphemisms. However,  
 84 it should not be neglected that thieves' cant mainly serves to conceal crimes rather than to weaken insidious  
 85 insults.

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

90 Since money plays an essential role in the illegal activities of thieves, many money related cant words were  
 91 popular with thieves, such as blunt, bustle, crop, dust, ribband, Kings pictures, and yellow boy. More specific  
 92 words were created to differentiate the value of currencies, for example, bob, twelver, and borde all refer to a  
 93 shilling; duce is equivalent to a twopence; crook is tantamount to a sixpence. ??Seboek, ??5) Phrases such  
 94 as bandog, philistine, catch pole, fool finder, and shoulder clapper were used to taunt those in charge of law  
 95 enforcement, namely, the perennial predators of thieves. As for different types of crimes, thieves also created a  
 96 range of expressions which integrate witty humor with the function of camouflage, for example, the phrase "dive  
 97 to pocket" carries the meaning of stealing money; the phrase "heave a couch" is synonymous with robbing a house.  
 98 There are more phrases in thieves' cant to describe the different ways of theft, for instance, the phrase "black art"  
 99 indicates the skill of picking locks; mill a glaze refers to breaking a window. An inclination for witticism finds  
 100 expression in phrases such as city college, block houses, boarding school, and sheriff's hotel, whereas phrases such  
 101 as navy office, bulwark, and stone tavern tend to be ambiguously pejorative.

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102 **2 III.**

103 **3 The Characteristics of the**  
104 **4 Gangster Argot in the Godfather**

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

112 Vito Corleone is described as a sophisticated dictator who wields his unbridled powers randomly irrespective  
113 of law and order. He resorts to his personal judgment to decide who is good and evil, but he even does not  
114 realize that his "self-righteous" justice is indeed a transgression against civil rights. The Don beguiles himself  
115 with the condescending feeling that people who he offers help to shall be reverently succumbed to him. He is  
116 always much more concerned about his reputation than how much he can earn profitably. For instance, the Don  
117 never allows his followers and himself to be involved in drug business in spite of a potentially huge profit from  
118 it. His idiosyncratic masculinity reinforces his authority among his disciples and friends, yet the personality of  
119 being obdurate and commanding incurs hostility and rancor from his enemies.

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

125 **5 a) Adaptive Resilience**

126 Criminal clans like the Mafia are widely involved in the complexity of social relationships. The Mafia members,  
127 who are considered susceptible to seductions, attach great importance to authoritarianism and discipline. Anyone  
128 who fails to obey orders or defects from his organization is subjected to a severe retribution. In comparison with  
129 thieves' cant randomly used by petty outlaws, gangster argot as portrayed in

130 The Godfather tends to be more logically organized and systematically coherent. Although gangster argot is  
131 necessarily tinged with the dark side of human nature, the Mafia members are anything but uninhibited when  
132 speaking of some controversial topics. For example, the writer works out a decent phrase "house of ill fame"  
133 ??Puzo, ??2) to insinuate the place where prostitution occurs. When Sollozzo seeks for a collaboration with the  
134 Don family on drug dealing, Sonny tentatively reveals his support for Sollozzo's suggestion by claiming, "There is  
135 a lot of money in that white powder". ??Puzo, ??4) The use of the "white powder" is expressive of the speaker's  
136 cunning personality. In addition to the "white powder", the word "narcotic" is also often used to refer to drugs  
137 in gangster dialogues over the issue of drug dealings. "I think narcotics is the coming thing." ??Puzo, ??7) In  
138 comparison with poppy, heroin, and morphine, "narcotic" sounds more like a medical term so that the negativity  
139 of drugs are diluted imperceptibly.

140 After Michael is heavily beaten by Captain McCluskey in a hospital due to his desperate resistance to being  
141 arrested, the writer uses the phrase "bone fragments" to describe how severely Michael is wounded. "They have  
142 to dig some bone fragments out of your gums." ??Puzo, ??20) In this sentence, the "bone fragments", which  
143 literally stand for broken teeth, imply that Michael suffers from a severe injury in a pejorative tone.

144 **6 b) Absorptive Capacity**

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

147 (1) "Sonny has an inside man." (Puzo, 120) (2) "The ferret-faced button man was watching him intently."  
148 (Puzo, 98) (3) "Your boss is dead." (Puzo, 80) (4) "Stay negotiation over the phone or by messenger with  
149 Sollozzo." (Puzo, 91) ( ??) "These guys over there must be cops." (Puzo, 14) ( ??) "Those guys are FBI men."  
150 ??Puzo, ??5) The "inside man" in sentence (1) discloses that Sonny stealthily bribes a detective in command to  
151 support him. The "button man" in sentence ( ??) is a very authentic word to describe those who are resigned to a  
152 superior in a gangster clan. The "boss" in sentence (3), which is a loan word from commercial vocabulary, makes  
153 the Don's authority more visualized. The word "messenger" in sentence ( ??), rather than a postman or courier,  
154 often works as an unctuous mediator when tensions between different gangster families become irreconcilable.  
155 The "cops" and "FBI men" in sentences ( ??) and ( ??) are absorbed in ordinary speech and even put into use  
156 in news reports.

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

159 ( 7) "Pretty soon you'll want me to put up my dukes." (Puzo, 85) ( ??) "I hope we can straighten everything  
160 out." (Puzo, 147) ( 9) "I'd guess he has an ace up his sleeve." (Puzo, 109) (10) "I slipped and fell." (Puzo, 120)

161 ( 11) "Your friend is in trouble and his word don't go this far west anymore." ??Puzo, ??86) The word "duke" 162 in sentence ( ??) literally stands for a nobleman of the highest rank outside a royal family, but gangsters give it 163 a new meaning, namely, hand or fist. Sonny threatens to teach his brother Mike a lesson by saying "put up my 164 dukes". The phrase "straighten out" in sentence (8) refers to putting everything in order or settling all problems 165 perfectly. Those who are keen on poker games should find it easy to understand the implied meaning of sentence 166 (9). Someone who likes to hide an ace when playing cards is cunning and deceptive. Sentence ( ??0) is Mike's 167 subterfuge to conceal the fact that he has a fight with Captain McCluskey when he attempts to break away 168 from the arrest at the hospital. The word "far west" in sentence (11) can be understood as a parody of the 169 geographical term "the Far East". The writer makes a

### 170 7 c) Provocative Rhetoric

171 The wide use of rhetorical skills enhances the power of gangster argot in terms of provocation and emotional 172 appeals. (12) "The Don is still getting the stuff in the tubes, no food, so we don't have to worry about the kitchen." 173 ??Puzo, ??10) The word "kitchen", used as a metonymy, is evocative of food supply. As a survivor from a failed 174 assassination, the Don is receiving a medical care in hospital, and he is unable to take foods. By saying this, the 175 speaker assures that there is no need to worry about the possibility that assassins might put poisons in foods 176 prepared for the Don. ( ??3) "We must tread on each other's corns." ??Puzo, ??35) The word "corn" in sentence 177 (13) refers to conflicting interest groups, indicating that both parties have to make a compromise to end a feud. ( 178 ??4) "It was the first time that he realized the long arm of the Don." ??Puzo, ??01) The "long arm" in sentence ( 179 ??4) is a vivid metonymy which compares the hegemony of the Don family into man's bodily part. (15) "I know 180 you're not the muscle end of the family" (Puzo, 80) (16) "The Corleone Family don't have that much muscle 181 anymore." ??Puzo, ??31) Similarly, the word "muscle" in the above two sentences is used as a metonymy to 182 describe somebody's authoritarian position. (17) "We'll make to put a tail on Mike." ??Puzo, ??9) The "tail" in 183 sentence ( ??7) is synonymous with someone dispatched to trail and protect Mike surreptitiously. (18) "Solozzo 184 is dead meat." ??Puzo, ??8) The "dead meat" is metaphorically expressive of Solozzo's vulnerability to rancor 185 and anger. (19) "Solozzo must have given him a fortune for openers and promised him the moon to come." 186 (Puzo, 115) (20) "He was a hair away from death." ??Puzo, ??8) The above two sentences are typical examples 187 of hyperbole or overstatement. In sentence (19), the speaker exaggerates that the Captain gains a large profit 188 from Solozzo's bribery. The word "hair" in sentence (20) indicates a lucky survival from a failed assassination. 189 (21) "Who do I give this job to?" ??Puzo, ??9) At Connie Corleone's wedding, the dependents of the Don family 190 come to seek for a vengeful support from the Don. After accepting their requests, the Don discusses with his 191 associates about who will be sent to carry out his promised mission. The writer intentionally understates this 192 retaliatory revenge by using the word "job", which reflects the Don's cynical and sophisticated attitude toward 193 his checkered gangster career. ( ??2) "Did you do the job on Solozzo?" (Puzo, 143) (23) "Mike is doing the job on 194 her" ??Puzo, ??3) It can be deciphered from the novel that the phrase "do the job" has dual meanings. Sentence 195 (23) shows Clemenza's grievance against Michael for his obsession with Kay (Michael's girlfriend) without caring 196 about family affairs, but the phrase "do the job on Solozzo" in sentence (22) apparently has nothing to do with 197 a romantic flirtation. Gangster argot optimizes the art of secrecy without losing its conciseness. Most of the 198 time, mafia members are required to respond to orders promptly and to undertake tasks which must not be 199 discerned by outsiders, so they must be good at coordinating clarity with secrecy in their speech code to ensure 200 the efficiency and confidentiality of information exchange. The fact that the Mafia members are often involved 201 in murder cases spawns many substitutions for killing: (24) "He was paid off to set the Don up." (Puzo, 87) (25) 202 "You will save a lot of bloodshed." (Puzo, 81) (26) "He really took an awful gamble bucking the Don." (Puzo, 82) 203 (27) "His knocking off the old man is purely business I would go in with him." (Puzo, 87) (28) "You take care of 204 him?" (Puzo, 106) (29) "Or maybe he's just being very careful so that our button men won't nail him." (Puzo, 205 135) (30) "We have to get Solozzo right away." ??Puzo, ??24) In the above sentences, a sequence of phrases are 206 used to refer to assassinations that are commonly heard among gangsters. Phrases such as "blood saving" and 207 "nail someone" in sentences (25) and (29) reflect the ferocity of criminal groups. In contrast, phrases such as "set 208 up", "knocking off", and "bucking someone" sound more implicit and ambiguous without a contextual support. 209 The phrase "take care of" in sentence (28) can be understood as synonymous with teaching someone a lesson, 210 or even more severely, lynching someone to death. Sonny inquires Clemenza (a trustworthy chamberlain of the 211 Don family) about whether Paulie Gatto, whose betrayal leads to the failed assassination of the Don, has been 212 killed privately.

213 The following sentences demonstrate how criminal organizations in America are secretly operated: (31) "They 214 will all have clean records." (Puzo, 79) (32) "What percentage for my family?" (Puzo, 66) (33) "If Luca sold us 215 out, we're in real trouble." ??Puzo, ??0) Volume XVII Issue VII Version I (34) "Has Solozzo got the New York 216 police department in his pocket too?" (Puzo, 114) (35) "I told him I could wrap you around my finger, Sonny." 217 ??Puzo, ??9) In sentence (31), the word "record" reveals that gangster clans are fastidious about their newly 218 recruited members' background and history. Sentence (32) is often heard in gangster groups' negotiations over 219 the distribution of interests. Sentences (33) and (34) indicate that betrayal and bribery are severely detrimental 220 to the solidarity of gangster families. The phrase "wrap someone around one's finger" in sentence (35) bring to 221 light Tom Hagen's unchallenged prerogative in the Don family.

222 The following sentences are vividly descriptive of how the Mafia members transgress against the rule of civil

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223 government and how they interfere in governmental affairs such as spying, patrolling, surveillance, bodyguard,  
224 and arresting. (36) "Is the hospital covered?" (Puzo, 90) (37) "You hold your people in reserve but have them  
225 nosing around the city." (Puzo, 91) (38) "We have the whole area loaded." (Puzo, 91) (39) "I'm the hunted one."  
226 ??Puzo, ??49 IV.

## 227 **8 Conclusion**

228 Gangster argot is often underestimated as a "pollutant" to ordinary speech and a scourge of social violence,  
229 campus bullying in particular. An increase in language hybridity provides a possibility to detach gangster argot  
230 from its stereotype as a language of violence and obscenity. In spite of being alienated and suppressed by  
231 mainstream society, gangster argot undergoes a major change from randomness to maturity. The formation and  
232 evolution of gangster argot not only reflects the in-depth stratification of human languages, but also exemplifies  
233 man's instinctual demand for belonging and conformity. <sup>1 2 3</sup>

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