

DECODING THE STREET: SLANG, STYLE, AND SUBCULTURE IN *THE WOLF OF WALL STREET*

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Abstract

This study explores the strategic use of slang in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) through a sociolinguistic lens, focusing on how language reflects and constructs identity within a high-risk financial subculture. Employing qualitative content analysis, the research identifies types and functions of slang used by central characters and interprets their socio-pragmatic implications. Findings reveal that slang in the film serves as a tool for group solidarity, performative masculinity, and rebellion against institutional norms. It blends financial jargon with vulgarity, forming a hybrid register that mirrors the characters' moral and psychological collapse. Drawing on theories of identity and language variation, this study shows that slang in the film not only enhances narrative realism but also conveys ideological critique of capitalism, power, and excess. The linguistic landscape becomes a performative arena where authority is enacted through speech, and subcultural belonging is reinforced through stylized vulgarity. This research contributes to media linguistics by decoding how cinematic slang articulates social values and cultural ideologies in contemporary film discourse.

Keywords: capitalism; identity; slang; sociolinguistics; *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi penggunaan strategis bahasa slang dalam film *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) melalui pendekatan sosiolinguistik, dengan fokus pada bagaimana bahasa mencerminkan dan membentuk identitas dalam subkultur finansial berisiko tinggi. Dengan menggunakan metode analisis konten kualitatif, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi jenis-jenis dan fungsi slang yang digunakan oleh tokoh-tokoh utama serta menafsirkan implikasi sosiopragmatiknya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa slang dalam film berfungsi sebagai alat untuk memperkuat solidaritas kelompok, menampilkan maskulinitas performatif, dan memberontak terhadap norma institusional. Bahasa yang digunakan mencampurkan jargon finansial dengan vulgaritas, menciptakan register hibrid yang mencerminkan keruntuhan moral dan psikologis para tokohnya. Dengan merujuk pada teori identitas dan variasi bahasa, studi ini memperlihatkan bahwa slang tidak hanya memperkuat realisme naratif, tetapi juga menyampaikan kritik ideologis terhadap kapitalisme, kekuasaan, dan eksek. Lanskap linguistik film menjadi arena performatif di mana otoritas dibangun melalui ujaran dan keterikatan subkultural ditegaskan melalui gaya bahasa yang

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kasar. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap kajian linguistik media dengan menguraikan bagaimana slang dalam film merepresentasikan nilai sosial dan ideologi budaya dalam wacana sinema kontemporer.

Kata kunci: identitas; kapitalisme; sociolinguistik; slang; *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of language in the context of globalization and digital communication has brought about significant transformations in how individuals interact, construct meaning, and represent identity. Language today does not merely function as a neutral tool of communication—it serves as a deeply ideological and performative medium through which power, belonging, and culture are negotiated. In contemporary society, slang has emerged as a particularly salient linguistic form. Often misunderstood as frivolous or deviant, slang in fact represents a dynamic mode of linguistic innovation that reflects group identity, cultural resistance, and subcultural expression. As such, it has become a critical point of interest in sociolinguistic research, especially within media and pop culture contexts.

Slang, as defined by Eble (2012), is a set of informal lexical items that arise spontaneously in particular communities and evolve rapidly based on shared experience, humor, and social position. Slang is often used to mark in-group membership and to exclude outsiders, making it a powerful tool for social differentiation. Within the framework of identity theory in sociolinguistics, Bucholtz and Hall (2016) assert that language is not simply reflective of identity, but constitutive of it—identity is enacted and re-enacted through discourse. This is particularly evident in digital and audiovisual media, where stylized speech patterns are not only reflective of subcultural affiliation but are also curated for audience reception and cultural impact.

Cinema, as a multimodal form of storytelling, offers a unique space for the analysis of slang. Films not only mirror linguistic realities but also shape them, projecting certain ways of speaking into the mainstream and influencing how audiences perceive language and identity. The use of slang in film is rarely arbitrary—it is often a deliberate strategy to reflect authenticity, capture character psychology, and align with genre conventions.

In this regard, Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) serves as a compelling case study. The film is known not only for its controversial themes—corporate greed, addiction, and moral decay—but also for its excessive use of slang, profanity, and subcultural lexicon. These linguistic features are not merely embellishments; they are fundamental to how characters are developed, how power relations are established, and how ideologies are communicated.

The Wolf of Wall Street dramatizes the real-life story of Jordan Belfort, a former stockbroker whose firm, Stratton Oakmont, defrauded investors and operated outside ethical and legal boundaries. Central to the narrative is the performance of excess—not only in wealth and behavior, but also in language. The film's dialogue is laced with financial jargon, vulgar expressions, and sexually explicit slang, reflecting a linguistic ecosystem where traditional moral constraints are subverted. Language becomes both a weapon and a shield—a way to persuade, manipulate, dominate, and bond. The characters, primarily white, wealthy, and male, speak in a way that embodies what Connell (2005) describes as "hegemonic masculinity"—a form of masculinity characterized by dominance, control, and performative aggression, all of which are expressed and reinforced through specific speech patterns.

This study explores the role of slang in *The Wolf of Wall Street* as a linguistic manifestation of identity, power, and subcultural belonging. Drawing on sociolinguistic theories of variation, identity, and performance (Labov, 1972; Goffman, 1959; Eckert, 2019), the research examines how characters use slang not only to communicate but to construct themselves as members of a particular world—one defined by high-risk capitalism, male dominance, and rebellion against institutional norms. The film's use of slang does more than reflect reality; it constructs a hyperreal linguistic performance that invites viewers to both admire and critique the world it portrays.

The relevance of this research lies in the increasing importance of audiovisual media as a site for linguistic analysis. With the rapid spread of film and streaming platforms, media speech has become a powerful influence on real-world linguistic practices, especially among young audiences. As Tagliamonte and Brooke (2021) note, the line between media language and vernacular speech is increasingly blurred, with slang from films and TV series entering youth vocabularies at an unprecedented rate. Understanding how slang is deployed in film therefore offers insights not only into media discourse but also into the linguistic and cultural values that films propagate.

This research is guided by three interrelated questions: (1) What types of slang are used by characters in *The Wolf of Wall Street*? (2) How does slang function as a tool of social interaction and identity construction within the film's narrative? (3) What ideological messages are conveyed through the linguistic style of the characters? By answering these questions, the study aims to illuminate the ways in which slang operates as a strategic and symbolic resource in cinematic storytelling.

The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to identify and classify the different forms of slang used in the film; second, to analyze the functions of these linguistic choices in the construction of character, power, and subcultural identity; and third, to interpret the broader sociocultural meanings of the film's linguistic landscape. Ultimately, this study argues that slang in *The Wolf of Wall Street* is not only a reflection of subcultural speech but also a narrative device that reinforces the ideological underpinnings of the film's portrayal of masculinity, capitalism, and excess.

By critically engaging with the film's linguistic texture, this paper contributes to the broader field of language and media studies, highlighting how cinematic discourse can serve as a mirror and a mold for contemporary sociolinguistic realities.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study applies a descriptive qualitative approach using content analysis to examine the linguistic phenomena found in the film *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), particularly focusing on the use and function of slang as a sociolinguistic marker. The descriptive qualitative method was chosen because it allows the researcher to interpret complex language behaviors without relying on statistical generalization. This approach aims to explore language as a social practice embedded within cultural narratives, ideologies, and identities as reflected in cinematic discourse.

The primary data in this study consists of linguistic expressions, namely slang, jargon, and stylized speech acts used by the main characters in the film, especially Jordan Belfort, Donnie Azoff, and other brokers at Stratton Oakmont. The source material was selected purposively based on several criteria: (1) the dialogue must contain slang or culturally loaded expressions, (2) the utterance should be delivered in a socially significant context (e.g., business negotiation, drug use, group ritual), (3) the scene must reflect character identity and social power dynamics, and (4) the utterance must demonstrate either subcultural affiliation or ideological stance. These criteria were applied to ensure that only linguistically and sociologically relevant data were analyzed.

Data collection was conducted through close-viewing and manual transcription of the film. All dialogues were transcribed verbatim, focusing particularly on scenes where language is used strategically to assert dominance, create solidarity, or express rebellion. The transcripts were then reviewed multiple times to ensure both lexical and contextual accuracy. Supporting secondary data included academic works on slang, sociolinguistics, and stylistic variation in media discourse.

The analytical procedure involved three major phases. First, data reduction was conducted by filtering out only relevant utterances that contained slang or informal expressions. Second, the selected data were classified using a typology adapted from Eble (2012) and Mattiello (2008), which organizes slang based on function (emotive, referential, social) and form (clipping, blending, metaphorical slang, taboo, etc.). Third, data interpretation was carried out by applying key sociolinguistic frameworks including those of Labov (1972), Bucholtz and Hall (2016), and Eckert (2019). This interpretation focused on how slang index's identity, constructs group membership, and performs social positioning within the filmic narrative.

This multi-layered analysis was designed to move beyond surface-level description and uncover the deeper ideological and symbolic meanings attached to slang usage. The focus was not only on what slang is used, but why it is used, how it functions in discourse, and what social values it represents. Specific attention was also paid to the pragmatic and performative aspects of slang: how it is deployed in power-laden interactions, how it indexes masculinity, and how it performs group belonging or subversion.

To ensure data validity, triangulation was carried out through theoretical cross-checking with various scholarly sources in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and stylistics. The credibility of the transcription process was strengthened by iterative close-viewing and comparison with publicly available scripts when needed. The findings were further interpreted in light of media linguistics, which positions film language as both a reflection and a shaper of real-world linguistic practices.

Overall, this method aims not only to describe slang in cinematic language but to situate it within broader discourses of culture, capitalism, identity, and rebellion. In this way, the study seeks to contribute to the expanding field of language and media research by demonstrating how slang operates as a layered, strategic, and ideologically rich form of expression in film.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the research findings regarding the use of slang in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) and discusses their sociolinguistic implications based on the typology and theoretical frameworks previously outlined. The analysis reveals that slang in the film is not a random occurrence but a deliberate linguistic strategy that performs multiple social and narrative functions. The findings are categorized into four main themes: (1) The typology of slang expressions, (2) The social functions of slang, (3) The ideological implications of language use, and (4) the performative dimensions of slang in cinematic narrative.

A. Typological Patterns of Slang Expressions

One of the most prominent findings of this study is the varied typology of slang employed by the film's characters. Based on Eble's (2012) classification and Mattiello's (2008) taxonomy, the slang terms fall into several categories: taboo words, metaphorical slang, clippings, compounds, and cultural borrowings. Taboo words, especially profanity, dominate the dialogue. Characters regularly employ "fuck", "shit", "asshole", and other offensive expressions not just for shock value, but to signify dominance, frustration, camaraderie, or euphoria.

Clipped slang, such as “biz” (for business) and “ludes” (for Quaaludes), functions to increase brevity and casual tone while preserving semantic clarity within the group. Compound expressions like “pump and dump” or “sell-side shitshow” reflect insider financial jargon that blends the technical with the vulgar. These hybrid expressions not only carry semantic density but also perform a gatekeeping function—those who understand them are insiders; those who do not are outsiders.

In addition, metaphorical slang such as “wolf”, “beast”, or “alpha” serves symbolic functions by casting characters in bestial, primal roles. This metaphorical layer reinforces the film’s overarching Darwinian capitalism narrative: to survive, one must dominate. Slang thus becomes a mode of categorizing the world in predatory terms, collapsing finance with savagery.

B. Social Functions and Pragmatic Strategies

Beyond their structural forms, slang expressions in the film perform specific pragmatic and social functions. Drawing on Jakobson’s (1960) model of language functions and Halliday’s (1978) metafunctional analysis, the study finds that slang serves at least four functions in the film’s linguistic ecology: referential, expressive, phatic, and metalingual.

Referentially, slang terms encode precise social or financial realities. For example, “ludes” doesn’t merely signify a drug—it indexes a particular lifestyle of excess, dependency, and ritual. Expressively, slang allows characters to externalize emotions, especially aggression, ecstasy, and sarcasm. The frequent use of “fuck yeah!” or “you fucking legend!” is not only expressive but performative—it establishes affective alignment with others while displaying emotional intensity.

Phatically, slang is used to open, maintain, or end conversations in an informal register. Greeting a coworker with “What’s up, you dirty fucker?” serves not only as an insult but as a ritualized form of camaraderie. Meanwhile, metalinguistic uses of slang occur when characters comment on language itself, often laughing at how absurd or transgressive their speech has become—revealing a hyperawareness of linguistic deviance as performance.

C. Language, Identity, and Subcultural Affiliation

The third major finding pertains to how slang constructs identity and affiliation. As theorized by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), identity is a social and linguistic process. In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the characters use slang to signal alignment with a particular subculture—white, male, hyper-capitalist, and aggressively individualistic. The language they use marks them as members of a specific tribe, one whose values include hedonism, dominance, and disdain for authority.

The brokerage firm Stratton Oakmont becomes a discursive community with its own rules of speech. New recruits are initiated into this linguistic world, and mastery of its slang is equated with professional and social competence. The phrase “sell me this pen”, for example, becomes more than just a test of salesmanship—it is a rite of passage encoded with subcultural meaning. Those who fumble it are mocked, and those who ace it are celebrated with profane cheers and symbolic elevation.

Moreover, the identity enacted through slang is gendered. The film’s language is saturated with toxic masculinity—domination through words, degradation of women, celebration of conquest. Slang thus becomes a medium through which masculinity is performed, challenged, and reaffirmed.

D. Slang as Performative Excess and Theatricality

A particularly noteworthy dimension of the film’s slang is its role as theatrical performance. Echoing Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model and Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity, the use of slang by characters like Jordan Belfort transcends utility; it becomes an act. Belfort’s monologues are profane sermons. His speeches to his employees are filled with rhythmic repetition, invective, obscene metaphors, and linguistic escalation.

For instance, in his rallying speech—"I'm not leaving... the show goes on!"—he peppers his language with profanity not to offend, but to electrify. The audience (both diegetic and cinematic) is not merely informed but seduced. Swearing becomes a stylistic device akin to a drumbeat, synchronizing emotional energy among the audience.

These speech acts are highly stylized. They are practiced, rehearsed, and exaggerated for maximal effect. Slang operates here not merely as language but as spectacle. The excessive use of obscenities is itself a form of rebellion, a rejection of corporate formality, and an embrace of transgressive authenticity.

E. Ideological Implications of Slang Use

At its deepest level, the use of slang in *The Wolf of Wall Street* reveals the ideological underpinnings of the film's representation of capitalism, morality, and language. As suggested by Fairclough (1992), language both reflects and reproduces ideology. The linguistic landscape of the film reflects a world where power is articulated through speech—fast, loud, obscene speech. Success is indexed not through quiet professionalism but through verbal violence.

The casual use of misogynistic and dehumanizing slang terms such as "bitches", "whore", or "piece of ass" speaks to the normalization of patriarchal discourse in capitalist spaces. These expressions are not merely background noise; they are indicative of a workplace culture where women are either absent or objectified. The film, through its linguistic choices, critiques this environment by revealing its grotesqueness, yet simultaneously revels in it—creating an intentional ideological tension.

Slang, then, becomes a vehicle for both narrative immersion and sociopolitical commentary. It is part of the aesthetic of excess that defines the film, reflecting not only the characters' inner chaos but the systemic moral bankruptcy of the environment they inhabit.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study confirm that slang in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) is not merely an incidental feature of colloquial cinematic dialogue, but a carefully constructed linguistic device that performs multiple semiotic and social functions. Slang operates as a discursive vehicle for enacting identity, reproducing subcultural values, and dramatizing the ideological tensions embedded within capitalist narratives. Far from being linguistically neutral, the slang used by the film's characters—particularly those in positions of power such as Jordan Belfort—serves to reinforce hierarchical relations, embody hypermasculine posturing, and normalize moral deviance under the guise of charisma and "success."

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the strategic use of slang fulfills pragmatic functions such as expressing solidarity, displaying aggression, indexing group membership, and facilitating informal communication within exclusive networks. These speech patterns are not universal but highly context-dependent, tightly bound to the particular sociocultural milieu of Wall Street subculture—a world in which verbal excess mirrors financial excess, and where linguistic flamboyance functions as symbolic capital.

The performative nature of slang also underscores its rhetorical power. Profanity, taboo terms, and stylized vulgarity in the film are deployed theatrically, becoming integral to character construction and plot progression. Jordan's speeches, laced with obscenity and ritualistic repetition, function not only to motivate and manipulate but also to seduce. The audience, both within and outside the narrative world, is invited to experience affective proximity with a morally dubious figure through the linguistic spectacle he delivers. This affective manipulation reveals how language can blur the boundaries between critique and celebration, between condemnation and glamorization.

At the ideological level, the film's use of slang acts as a mirror to a larger cultural moment—one in which unchecked capitalism, patriarchal dominance, and toxic performance of masculinity are not only tolerated but rewarded. Slang, as seen in this film, is not just about breaking norms linguistically; it is about breaking ethical boundaries while disguising violence with wit, vulgarity with charm, and exploitation with ambition. The normalization of such discourse in popular media illustrates the extent to which power relations are encoded in everyday speech, and how language, far from being a neutral conduit of meaning, is complicit in shaping what we value, tolerate, and emulate.

Therefore, the use of slang in *The Wolf of Wall Street* must be understood as both a linguistic and cultural artifact. It reflects and constructs the very conditions of social reality in the neoliberal era, where performance is profit, style is power, and language is both a weapon and a mask. This study thus contributes to ongoing conversations in media linguistics and sociolinguistics by demonstrating how cinematic language can not only portray subcultures but also participate in the symbolic production of those subcultures. Slang in this context is not just a matter of word choice—it is a declaration of ideology, identity, and intent.

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