ANALYSIS OF SLANG WORDS IN THE "*OUTER BANKS*" SERIES AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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Abstrak

This study aims to analyze the use of slang in the Netflix series "*Outer Banks*" as a manifestation of social stratification between the working-class group and the upper-class group. Using a sociolinguistic approach and a qualitative descriptive method, this research analyzes dialogues from 20 episodes of the first two seasons. The findings identify seven main categories of slang that function as markers of group identity and instruments for maintaining social boundaries. The use of informal language not only reflects existing class hierarchies but also actively constructs and reproduces social structures through linguistic inclusion and exclusion mechanisms. This study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between language, identity, and social stratification in the context of contemporary media representation.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Social Stratification, Linguistic Identity, Popular Media, Language Variation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the most fundamental symbolic system in human life. It not only functions as a means of conveying information but also plays a vital role in shaping social structures, expressing identity, and reproducing ideology. Within the social sphere, language never exists in a neutral state. Linguistic variation within a community reflects and simultaneously reinforces existing social stratification. Differences in vocabulary, dialects, registers, and language varieties often serve as markers of status, class, age group, and cultural affiliation. Thus, the use of specific language forms in particular contexts can serve as an indicator of the speaker's social position within society (Holmes, 2013).

One of the most prominent forms of linguistic variation in contemporary society is slang. Slang is an informal form of language commonly used by specific social groups, particularly young people, to foster a sense of solidarity, strengthen group identity, and distinguish themselves from others. Slang not only represents linguistic creativity but also serves as a social instrument that reflects dynamics of power, resistance, and exclusion. According to Eble (1996), the use of slang demonstrates a desire to establish social proximity while rejecting formal linguistic norms associated with authority and dominance. Therefore, slang is often seen as a symbol of cultural resistance against established social structures.

The development of technology and mass media, especially entertainment platforms such as films, music, and television series, has provided a new stage for the use and dissemination of slang. Media not only represent social realities but also actively shape public perceptions of identity, social class, and cultural differences. Through characters and narrative structures, media distribute specific representations of how different social groups speak, behave, and experience life. In this context, language in media becomes an ideological space where values, norms, and power structures are negotiated and maintained (Hall, 1997).

Slang in popular media is particularly intriguing to analyze because it appears not only as a linguistic ornament but also as a symbol of collective identity constructed within the narrative. Characters from different social backgrounds are typically represented using distinct language varieties. In many cases, this linguistic contrast is not merely for characterization purposes but also to assert the existing social stratification within the story. Differences in the use of slang between marginalized and dominant groups can reflect power imbalances, identity conflicts, and the complex social processes embedded within the narrative.

In this context, the present study explores the use of slang in a popular television series as a reflection of social class differences. Television series are chosen as the object of study due to their strong narrative structure, complex characterization, and wide global distribution, making their representations highly influential to audiences. The selected series portrays teenagers from extremely divergent economic and social backgrounds, with these differences clearly reflected in their speech patterns. The slang used by these characters reveals patterns of group exclusivity, symbols of resistance, and the construction of contrasting group identities between those with power and those socially marginalized.

This research operates under the assumption that the use of slang in popular media not only mirrors social realities but also actively shapes and reproduces social constructions of class, identity, and power. By analyzing the form and function of slang in character dialogues, this study aims to uncover how language is used to construct social boundaries, assert class positions, and convey implicit ideologies embedded within the narrative.

The primary aim of this study is to identify the types of slang used by characters in the series and to analyze how these slangs reflect the social structures depicted in the storyline. Additionally, the study seeks to understand how variations in slang usage between social groups signify symbolic domination, social exclusion, and the process of identity formation through language. Using a sociolinguistic framework and a descriptive qualitative method, this research aims to contribute theoretically to the study of language, identity, and social stratification, while also offering a critical analysis of the representations in contemporary popular media.

This research is urgent and relevant, considering the significant role media play in shaping public understanding of social differences. In a digital era marked by the massive circulation of audiovisual content, the representation of language in media is no longer merely a matter of aesthetics or entertainment but also an ideological and political concern. The analysis of slang in media can open pathways for understanding how language functions to reinforce or challenge established structures of social power.

By employing a case study from a popular television series, this study is expected to demonstrate how discourses of social class and identity are shaped through linguistic representations. Slang, in this case, becomes an entry point for exploring the hidden social meanings embedded in dialogue, as well as revealing how social structures are represented, negotiated, and contested through language in popular media.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Slang is a form of informal linguistic variation commonly used in interactions within specific social groups, particularly among youth, workers, or members of subcultures. Eble (1996) explains that slang serves to strengthen group solidarity, create a sense of belonging, and differentiate members from outsiders. This informal language typically develops organically, is non standardized, and is highly contextual, depending on the time, place, and social situation of its speakers.

Coleman (2012) emphasizes that slang possesses a strong sociocultural dimension, as it reflects the values, experiences, and collective ideologies of its speakers. Slang functions not only as a communication tool but also as a reflection of social dynamics such as resistance to norms, class identity, and symbolic group boundaries. Eckert (2000) echoes this view by stating that linguistic variation among teenagers including the use of slang is instrumental in constructing lifestyles, gender roles, and social affiliations.

Slang can also be viewed as a form of exclusive linguistic identity. Mattiello (2008) argues that the use of slang marks membership within a specific group while simultaneously excluding those unfamiliar with the linguistic code. Thus, slang serves a dual purpose: it functions as a symbol of inclusion and as a tool of social exclusion.

In the realm of sociolinguistics, linguistic variation is closely linked to social structures, particularly in terms of class stratification. Labov (1972) demonstrates that speech patterns are significantly influenced by a speaker's socioeconomic background. Language becomes a key indicator of social class and group affiliation. Informal language forms such as slang are often associated with working class or marginalized communities, while standard or formal language is typically linked to the middle or upper classes.

Trudgill (2000) reinforces this by stating that language holds symbolic functions that represent power relations within society. In this context, the use of slang by lower class groups becomes a form of symbolic resistance against the cultural dominance of the upper class. Slang is used to signify difference, reject assimilation, and reinforce the identity of oppressed groups. Bourdieu (1991) refers to this phenomenon as "symbolic violence," wherein social structures are reproduced through symbolic practices such as language.

At the same time, Bucholtz (1999) explains that teenagers use slang to construct alternative identities that do not necessarily conform to dominant norms. This creates a discursive space in which language becomes a tool for negotiating meaning, power, and social existence. In many cases, social groups with limited access to economic resources use slang as a form of protest or escape from the social pressures they face (Alim, 2004).

Mass media and popular culture play a significant role in disseminating and normalizing linguistic variations such as slang. Television series, films, and music serve as arenas where informal language is introduced to broader audiences. Hall (1997) asserts that media not only reflect social reality but also shape it through symbolic representations. The language used in media, including slang, represents ideologies, social class, and power structures.

According to Androutsopoulos (2007), the use of slang in media serves to create character authenticity and reinforce the social narratives being portrayed. Media employ diverse language registers to represent characters as belonging to specific classes. Thus, slang in media is not merely an aesthetic choice but also an ideological strategy that shapes public perception of class and social identity.

Furthermore, Coupland (2001) describes this phenomenon as "stylization," referring to the deliberate use of linguistic variation in media to construct character identity based on social stereotypes. For instance, characters from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are often depicted using coarse slang, while elite characters are portrayed using standard language. These representations can reinforce social stereotypes and naturalize class inequality as something "normal".

Slang in popular media also has the potential to either reinforce or challenge established social constructions. Teen dramas often depict slang as a symbol of resistance to authority, youth solidarity, or expressions of alternative identities. However, as Fairclough (1995) reminds us, media can also unconsciously reproduce dominant ideologies through the language it employs, including in its portrayal of linguistic variation like slang.

Studies on the use of slang in teen dramas have been conducted by several scholars. Bucholtz and Lopez (2011) examined how youth language in media is used to construct racial and social identities within the context of the United States. They found that linguistic based characterizations are closely tied to social positioning and ethnic stereotypes.

Similarly, Green (2002) in her research on *African American Vernacular Englis*h *(AAVE)* in popular culture found that slang forms are often selectively represented to enhance an "urban" image, sometimes detached from their original social context. This shows that slang representations in media are not always neutral but are imbued with aesthetic and commercial agendas.

On the other hand, a study by Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) on teen drama dialogue in the UK revealed that slang usage reflects evolving linguistic trends among youth and can serve as an indicator of broader social changes. They argued that slang variation in media reflects not only age differences but also distinctions in class and gender.

Thorne (2006) even found that slang usage in media not only shapes representation but also influences real life language use. This is referred to as a "linguistic feedback loop," where language from media is adopted by audiences, thereby reinforcing the role of media as an agent of linguistic change.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a **qualitative descriptive approach**, aiming to understand linguistic phenomena within social contexts by interpreting the meanings embedded in texts or utterances. As stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of social and cultural dynamics based on the subjective meanings produced by social actors within specific contexts. Therefore, this method is highly relevant for examining the use of slang in media, particularly in the *Outer Banks* series, which features various verbal interactions that reflect class dynamics and social identity.

A **descriptive design** is used to systematically and thoroughly present the findings, focusing on the description of the slang expressions that emerge, the contexts in which they are used, and the social functions attached to these terms. This study does not aim to generalize findings statistically, but rather to understand linguistic patterns as representations of broader social structures.

The primary data in this study are derived from character dialogues in the Netflix series *Outer Banks*, which was first released in 2020. The analysis focuses on the first two seasons of the series, comprising a total of 20 episodes. This series was selected due to its explicit representation of the conflict between two groups of teenagers from sharply contrasting socio-economic backgrounds, providing ample space to observe linguistic variations, particularly in the form of slang.

Outer Banks is set in a fictional coastal area of North Carolina, USA, and centers on two main social groups: one from the working class and the other from the wealthy elite. The series' dialogues reflect class tensions, group solidarity, and resistance to authority, all of which are conveyed through language use, including slang.

Data were collected using **non participant observation**, involving the active viewing of all episodes in the first two seasons of *Outer Banks*. Each time a slang term appeared in the dialogue, the researcher recorded the following details:

1. The slang word or phrase used,
2. The name of the character who uttered it,
3. The recipient of the utterance,
4. The scene's setting, and
5. The social or emotional context in which the slang was used.

Multiple key scenes were rewatched to ensure the accuracy of slang identification and contextual analysis. Additionally, unofficial scripts or transcripts available online were used to **triangulate** the data. This systematic documentation method enabled the researcher to obtain context rich and socially representative linguistic data.

Once all relevant slang terms had been identified and categorized, the data were analyzed using a **content analysis approach**, focusing on three main aspects:

1) **Classification of Slang Forms**

   This analysis examines the types of slang based on linguistic structure and semantic categorization (e.g., acronyms, metaphors, identity labels, euphemisms, etc.).

2) **Social Functions of Slang**

   This aspect explores the role of slang in constructing group identity, creating symbolic boundaries, and signaling power relations and resistance to social norms. The analysis draws on sociolinguistic theories from Trudgill (2000), Labov (1972), and Holmes (2013), as well as social identity theories from Bucholtz (2001) and Bourdieu (1991).

3) **Media Representation and Language Ideology**

   This component investigates how slang is represented in popular media, including the ideologies implied through word choices, character portrayals, and social group dynamics. The framework refers to Hall's (1997) concept of cultural representation and Barthes' (1972) notion of mythologies in media.

The data were tabulated and synthesized into findings organized according to the linguistic and social functions of each identified slang term. To ensure data validity, the researcher applied **triangulation techniques** by combining multiple data sources (multi source) and analysis methods (multi method), and engaged in peer discussions during the interpretation process.

In qualitative research, the validity of data heavily relies on the **credibility and honesty of the researcher's interpretation**. Therefore, several strategies were adopted to ensure validity:

1) **Data Triangulation**: Utilizing various sources of information (scripts, videos, academic references) to verify findings.
2) **Peer Review**: Discussing preliminary results with supervisors and colleagues to avoid interpretive bias.
3) **Audit Trail**: Maintaining systematic documentation of data recording, classification, and interpretation to ensure transparency in the analytical process.

This study has several limitations. First, the object of analysis is confined to a single television series with an American cultural context, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the analysis is restricted to the first two seasons, meaning subsequent developments in slang use in later seasons are not covered. Nonetheless, the focused analysis of these two seasons enables a **comprehensive exploration** of the relationship between slang and social stratification as represented in the media narrative.

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4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of 20 episodes from the first and second seasons of *Outer Banks*, it is evident that the use of slang in the series holds significant social functions in constructing and maintaining symbolic boundaries between character groups. The researcher identified seven prominent slang terms that appear repeatedly and consistently throughout the dialogue, reflecting a fictional social structure divided into two major groups: the working class and the elite. These terms are used to establish group identity, indicate symbolic opposition, and reinforce the narrative's internal class hierarchy.

a. Pogue – Symbol of Working-Class Identity and Semantic Reappropriation

The term "Pogue" serves as a label embraced by working class characters as a form of collective identity. Initially derogatory, the term has undergone semantic reappropriation, becoming a symbol of pride and defiance against an oppressive social system.

"We're the Pogues, and our mission this summer is to have a good time, all the time." (John B, Season 1 Episode 1).

Here, John B introduces the group's identity to the audience. The term no longer functions as an insult but as a badge of affirmation. According to Eble (1996), this process is known as *semantic reclamation*, where marginalized groups reclaim derogatory terms and transform them into sources of solidarity and empowerment.

Additionally, "Pogue" establishes a clear boundary of group membership it is exclusively used by those within the group and never adopted by the elite characters.

b. Kook – Social Label for the Elite and a Form of Verbal Resistance

In contrast, "Kook" is used by the working-class group to label the elite characters who enjoy wealth and power. The term carries a disparaging connotation and functions as verbal resistance against the dominance of the upper class.

"You sound like a kook." (JJ, Season 1 Episode 2)

JJ's statement to John B reveals how the term is used to regulate group behavior and enforce in group norms. In this context, slang operates as both internal social control and critique of elite values. According to Bourdieu (1991), this can be interpreted as reversed symbolic violence, where the subordinate group uses language to ideologically reframe social hierarchy.

Interestingly, some elite characters use the term self referentially, often with irony:

"I know I'm a Kook, but…" (Sarah Cameron, Season 1 Episode 4)

This indicates that social identity is not always passively accepted, but can be negotiated. Sarah's usage shows a reflective stance toward her social position, in line with Bucholtz's (2001) idea that identity is actively constructed through discourse.

c. The Cut – Territorial Marker and Working-Class Geographical Identity

"The Cut" refers to the area where the working-class characters reside. In a sociolinguistic sense, this term denotes more than a physical location it symbolizes socioeconomic status.

"He lives in The Cut, what do you expect?" (Sarah, Season 1 Episode 4)

The phrase conveys prejudice and stereotyping associated with this territory. According to Trudgill (2000), this represents location based linguistic variation, where place of residence becomes a marker of social status.

d. Figure Eight – Symbol of Wealth and Spatial Exclusion

Contrasting "The Cut," "Figure Eight" is the exclusive area inhabited by wealthy characters.

"They don't let Pogues into Figure Eight." (JJ, Season 1 Episode 1)

This line underscores the spatial and social exclusivity of the elite. As Holmes (2013) points out, social structures are often reflected through linguistic and spatial boundaries reinforced by discourse.

e. Dingbatter – Exclusionary Language Toward Outsiders

"Dingbatter" refers to outsiders or tourists unfamiliar with local social norms.

"Stupid dingbatter tourist." (JJr, Season 1 Episode 3)

This slang operates as a defense mechanism. Bucholtz (1999) notes that linguistic communities often use pejorative slang to protect their social boundaries. Here, slang serves a horizontal function: distinguishing "us" from "them" within the local context.

f. Pougelandia – Collective Imagination and Working-Class Utopia

"Pougelandia" is a fictional slang term referring to an imagined space where the working class is free from elite domination.

"This is our Pougelandia." (Season 2 Episode 6)

This term represents symbolic resistance and group solidarity. According to Hall (1997), language constructs symbolic worlds to counter oppressive social realities. The concept aligns with Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of an *imagined community*, in which collective identity is built through shared symbols and narratives even without physical cohesion.

g. Kook Princess – Dual Identity and Social Intersectionality

"Kook Princess" is a slang term referring to Sarah Cameron, encapsulating both class ("Kook") and gender ("Princess").

"That's Sarah Cameron, Kook Princess." (John B, Season 1 Episode 1)

This label is rich in social implications, reflecting both her elite status and the stereotypical traits of a privileged woman wealthy, pampered, and dependent. Drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, this term highlights how class and gender intersect to shape social identity.

The term critiques not only Sarah's privilege but the structural dynamics that determine a woman's social position through lineage rather than agency. In this case, slang does not merely describe; it reproduces and naturalizes social commentary on gender and class roles.

The analysis shows that slang in *Outer Banks* functions beyond mere informal speech it becomes an ideological arena where identity and power are negotiated. Within the narrative, slang allows the working class to:

1. Build internal solidarity (e.g., *Pogue*, *Pougelandia*),
2. Create symbolic opposition against the elite (e.g., *Kook*, *Figure Eight*),
3. Subvert stereotypes through reverse labeling (*Kook Princess*, *Dingbatter*), and
4. Mark geographical and social boundaries (*The Cut*, *Figure Eight*).

As Barthes (1972) explained, this process can be understood as *mythologization*, where linguistic signs acquire naturalized social meanings. For instance, viewers may unconsciously accept that "*Pogue*" represents authenticity and rebellion, while "Kook" implies arrogance and corruption despite both being narrative constructions.

Slang in media, as Androutsopoulos (2012) asserts, often simplifies complex social dynamics into digestible symbols that reinforce character tropes and storylines. Consequently, the intricate social structures are reduced to shallow yet culturally potent linguistic signs.

Outer Banks becomes a symbolic battlefield of class struggle, where language is weaponized by the marginalized to assert their presence. Yet, as Fairclough (1995) warns, media may also reproduce dominant ideologies even while appearing to critique them. Despite the heroism and authenticity attributed to the Pogues, they are still framed within narrow tropes poor but happy, violent but honest, oppressed yet exotic. Meanwhile, the Kooks are portrayed as stereotypical antagonists: rich, manipulative, and superficial.

Thus, even while providing space for resistance, slang in this series still operates within the constraints of mainstream media narratives that serve aesthetic and commercial interests.

5. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the use of slang in *Outer Banks* functions not only as informal linguistic expression but also as a complex reflection of social structure and group identity. Through a sociolinguistic approach and qualitative descriptive method using content analysis, seven dominant slang terms were identified: *Pogue*, *Kook*, *The Cut*, *Figure Eight*, *Dingbatter*, *Pougelandia*, and *Kook Princess*. These terms go beyond lexical function and act as social, symbolic, and ideological tools in narrating class conflict between working class and elite characters.

Pogue symbolizes the working class's effort to reclaim a negative label into a source of pride. *Kook* serves as verbal resistance against elitism, while *The Cut* and *Figure Eight* mark sharp geographic and social divisions. *Dingbatter* protects local identity from outsiders, *Pougelandia* illustrates Utopian collective imagination, and *Kook Princess* reflects the intersection of class and gender dynamics.

The analysis affirms that slang acts as a marker of identity, solidarity, and exclusion, as well as a mirror of power relations embedded within society mediated through popular media representations. Language in *Outer Banks* is not neutral; it operates as ideological discourse that shapes audience perceptions of class, authenticity, and resistance.

This study also supports the argument that media language not only reflects but actively reproduces and reshapes social structures, both by normalizing stereotypes and by idealizing certain groups. Series like *Outer Banks* become symbolic arenas where social conflicts are narratively packaged, and slang becomes a key instrument to navigate the tensions between individual identity, collective belonging, and complex class hierarchies.

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