As a fundamental tool of human observation, language can be a determining factor in deciphering elements of an individual or group’s status in a society. Whether or not one is conscious of their speech patterns during conversations, aspects of his or her language vary according to the situational context of them. Many of these variances are dependent upon the dynamic of power within the conversation, such as with whom one is speaking and the purpose of the conversation itself. “For this reason, language should not be seen as a passive conduit of power but as an active coplayer in the exercise of power” (Reid & Ng 2). This implementation of power through sociolinguistics can be exampled in the opening sequence of Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather: Part I* (1972). By applying Dell Hymes’ SPEAKING Model, which examines speech through its setting, participants, ends, sequencing, keys, instrumentalities, interactive and interpretative norms, and genre, to the conversation between characters Vito Corleone and Bonasera, the palpable influence of power is witnessed through asymmetrical talk, code-switching, silence, and turn-taking.

**Setting & Scene**

In 1945 at his Long Island, New York estate, Mafia boss Don Vito Corleone sits at the desk of his home office, surrounded by two of his associates, while the wedding reception of his daughter takes place in his backyard. The dimly lit room is the setting for a conversation between the Don and Bonasera, his old friend and an undertaker. The latter is there due to the Sicilian
tradition that no father may turn down a request on the day of his daughter’s wedding, and he has a request for Vito. Considering the serious and delicate subject matter of which they speak, the mood is somber and calm, and despite their pre-existent friendship, the dialogue is highly formal and, at times, impersonal, making the conversation’s atmosphere closer in feel to a business meeting than a discussion between old friends.

**Participants**

Obviously, Bonasera and Vito are the main participants in the conversation, as the spoken dialogue occurs entirely between the two of them. Both men are Italian immigrants, and they seem to be in their mid-to-late-50s. They also appear to be close in socio-economic status as well, which is probably upper middle class for Bonasera and high class for Vito. Yet, they are not the only individuals within the office, and, therefore, not the only participants in the conversation. The two men standing on either side of Vito are his biological son Sonny and his adopted son Tom Hagen, who acts as the lawyer for the Corleone family.

**Ends**

Anyone who approaches Vito, a man who is referred to as the Godfather by those in close relationship to him, for a favor during the course of the day is allowed to plead his or her case before the Don and await the verdict of how he will grant the request. As such, Bonasera, having been disappointed by the court system of America with the punishment of two men who beat and attempted to rape his daughter, comes to take advantage of Vito’s obligation on this day, in hopes of the Godfather murdering them. Ultimately, Vito decides to make them suffer in return for Bonasera’s alliance.

**Act Sequence**
The conversation begins with Bonasera’s statement of purpose, stating, “I believe in America.” While Vito listens sincerely across from him, Bonasera begins to describe the events that led to his daughter’s beating. After dating a young man, who, Bonasera emphasizes, was “not Italian,” for a short period, his daughter went out with him and one of his friends, and the two males attempted to intoxicate her and then forced themselves upon her. When she fought back, they “beat her like an animal,” breaking her nose and shattering her jaw. As he begins to fight back his tears, Vito gestures for Tom to pour him a shot of whiskey. After taking a small drink, he returns to his story. He immediately went to the police, but it was to no avail. They were sentenced to a three year suspended sentence. He declares, “I stood in the courtroom like a fool.” Following the trial, Bonasera explains that he knew he and his wife had to go to Vito for real justice.

When he is finished speaking, Vito wonders why he was not approached before the police. Bonasera acknowledges that he should have come to Vito first, but he requests that Vito does what he asks and whispers the favor into his ear. However, the Godfather shakes his head, refusing to murder them. He explains that for years Bonasera had wanted nothing to do with him and, now, on his daughter’s wedding day, Bonasera wants him to commit murder. He counters Bonasera’s comment that all he wishes for is justice, explaining that his daughter is still alive. Killing the two young men would simply be revenge. Bonasera replies that he simply wants them to suffer. He then offers payment for the action to be performed, but Vito balks at accepting his money. He places the cat on top of the desk and stands up, walking around the room to face Bonasera. Reiterating his disappointment that he was not approached before the police, he explains that this matter would have already been resolved, as his friends’ enemies are his enemies. Upon hearing this, Bonasera pleads for the Godfather to be his friend and kisses the
ring on Vito’s pinky finger. Vito accepts the undertaker’s pledge of loyalty, but he explains that in exchange for the “gift of justice,” Bonasera is now obliged to return the favor if the Godfather ever calls upon him. He nods, “Grazie, Godfather.” Opening the door, Vito responds, “Bene.” Bonasera then exits the room.

**Key**

There are several important keys that signal the tone of the conversation. First of all, when addressing Vito, Bonasera’s voice is completely solemn with a complete lack of warmth in or friendship. For him, this is not personal, simply business. He does not greet Vito – or vice versa – or include anecdotal stories. He is brief and straightforward, emphasizing the importance of his point.

Vito controls the conversation through his silence. This is an evocation of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of power, which states that power is divided into “rule,” where power is known or recognized by those it is inflicted upon, and “hegemony,” where it is hidden or concealed (Mesthrie & et. al 319). Vito falls into the former category, as he can rule without a single word.

**Instrumentalities**

Important instrumentalities include the cat that Vito plays with because it shows how he can manipulate and control another being, and the lighting from the lamp and windows, as it darkens the physical environment and creates a darkened mood as well. The desk also symbolizes the business nature of the conversation.

**Norms of Interaction & Interpretation**

Through his title of Godfather and Bonasera’s vocalization of his public reputation, it is clear that Vito is a very powerful man within the New York Mafia organization and, subsequently, commands much respect from both his rivals and those unassociated with the
Mob. Although Bonasera may not be directly tied to it, he clearly recognizes Vito’s stature within the hierarchy of power, which is reflected in his supplicant conversational style.

Throughout the conversation, it is also clear that racial identity is an important aspect of life for both of these men. The strength of Bonasera’s accent and difficulty with some aspects of American dialect suggests that he has spent much less time in the United States than Vito, which has not afforded him the same time to become accommodated. Therefore, his speech is choppy, and he must occasionally pause to translate his thoughts into English. Code-switching is seen towards the end of their conversation, as the men slip into Italian as they trade parting salutations. Interestingly, this happens only after their deal has been made and the tension has significantly decreased. They seem to be more comfortable around each other, and their former relationship overwhelms their business deal.

**Genre**

While the two men have known each other for a long period of time, the conversation is not cordial. It falls into the professional genre, as it is, for all intensive purposes (until the very end at least), a business meeting in which the terms of a deal are being negotiated.

**Analysis**

Like the film’s narrative itself, Vito’s ultimate power is a dominating influence on the structure of the conversation, which is a prime example of asymmetrical talk. As defined in *Introducing Sociolinguistics*, asymmetrical talk occurs when a speaker is in a “more powerful position” than another speaker. While witnessed in speeches between many types of participants, it is most visibly displayed in status-related terms and can affect the entire structure of the conversation and the styles of speech utilized by the participants. When applied to this conversation, then, Vito, as the boss of the organization that is being appealed, is inherently
dominant to Bonasera, who is the appealer, and, as a result, has greater rights to interacting than the latter (Mesthrie 203).

Each man methodically approaches the conversation in distinct ways. For Bonasera, his respectful and subservient manner is in direct parallel to his linguistic status as a weak participant. He recognizes that Vito controls the flow and movement of speech, and he restrains any act or any impulse that may overstep his limits. He must speak when spoken to and never interrupt while the Godfather is speaking. Turn-taking, therefore, is the most crucial function to the conversation because only Vito has the power to speak at any given moment. “Language creates power: Control over the direction and outcome of a conversation is the ability to win conversational turns…adopting a dynamic approach” (Reid & Ng 3). In response to his lack of power, Bonasera’s every action, including speaking and moving, must be done in compliance with Vito’s command. When he is finished explaining the rational behind his visit and Vito begins talking, he waits for the end of Vito’s comment before countering it with one of his own or his interruption may be seen as an act of disrespect.

Both Sonny and Tom must also follow the orders of the Godfather throughout the conversation. Although they never say a word, their silence adds to the gravitas of Vito’s power. Holding high positions in the family business, they are still subject to his will and stand completely still until they are given a command or allowed to move.

As shown through the use of Hymes’ SPEAKING Model, a conversational analysis reveals much more than what is actually said during an interaction. The conversation in *The Godfather* gives evidence to the importance of language in the evocation of power. On the surface, the conversation seems to be a simple request, but when given a more in depth look, the
audience learns a great deal about the characters, including their personal and professional identities.
Works Cited


Peer Review Appendix

My peer’s comments were extremely helpful when revising the final draft of my paper. Originally, I had neglected to leave room for a conclusion paragraph, but after reading her comments, I realized the necessity of wrapping my analysis up with a short paragraph of summary. This also forced me to edit much of my paper, which was much longer and too verbose in its initial version.

The most important part of her review was catching the little mistakes that simply fall through the cracks. There are always improvements to be made in this area, which may be avoided by having another person check over one’s work as well. She caught grammatical errors that I had not noticed and made suggestions that helped the paper be more precise. Awesome.

Nice job. Sociolinguistically based…

Grade: 9