



**SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE
FUNCTION IN *CATCH ME IF YOU CAN***

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ABSTRAK

Bahasa memiliki peran sentral dalam membentuk serta melegitimasi identitas profesional dalam berbagai situasi interaksi sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana tokoh Frank Abagnale Jr. membangun dan mempertahankan beragam identitas profesional melalui penggunaan bahasa dalam film *Catch Me If You Can* (2002). Kajian difokuskan pada praktik variasi bahasa yang muncul ketika tokoh utama menyamar sebagai pilot, dokter, dan pengacara, dengan menyoroti pengelolaan register, penyesuaian gaya tutur, serta fungsi bahasa dalam konteks institusional. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan menganalisis dialog-dialog terpilih yang ditranskripsikan dari adegan penting dalam film. Analisis dilakukan melalui identifikasi pilihan leksikal, tingkat formalitas, pola interaksi, dan tujuan komunikatif yang mencerminkan tuntutan profesional masing-masing peran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan bahasa yang selaras dengan norma dan ekspektasi profesi tertentu melalui pemanfaatan istilah teknis, register formal, dan gaya tutur berotoritas berperan penting dalam membangun persepsi kompetensi dan memperoleh pengakuan sosial. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa bahasa berfungsi sebagai perangkat performatif utama dalam konstruksi identitas profesional, di mana keanggotaan dan legitimasi dalam komunitas profesional dibentuk secara interaksional, bukan semata-mata ditentukan oleh kualifikasi formal.

Kata kunci: *Sociolinguistik, Fungsi Bahasa, Kinerja Identitas.*

ABSTRACT

Language plays a central role in shaping and legitimizing professional identity across various social interactional contexts. This study aims to examine how the character Frank Abagnale Jr. constructs and sustains multiple professional identities through language use in the film *Catch Me If You Can* (2002). The analysis focuses on patterns of linguistic variation that emerge when the main character impersonates a pilot, a doctor, and a lawyer, with particular attention to register management, speech style adaptation, and language functions within institutional settings. This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach by analyzing selected dialogues transcribed from key scenes in the film. The analysis involves identifying lexical choices, levels of formality, interactional patterns, and communicative purposes that reflect the professional demands of each assumed role. The findings indicate that language use aligned with professional norms and expectations through the deployment of technical terminology, formal registers, and authoritative speech styles plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of competence and gaining social recognition. These findings underscore that language functions as a primary performative resource in the construction of professional identity, in which membership and legitimacy within professional communities are interactionally achieved rather than solely determined by formal qualifications.

Keywords: *Sociolinguistics, Language Function, Identity Performance.*



INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a neutral medium for conveying information but a central resource for negotiating identity, social hierarchy, and power relations in interaction. Sociolinguistic research consistently demonstrates that individuals adjust their linguistic behavior in response to situational demands, interlocutor roles, and communicative goals (Botha & Bernaisch, 2025). Such adaptability highlights that language functions as a socially embedded practice rather than an autonomous system. In professional and institutional contexts, the ability to sound appropriate often becomes as important as possessing formal credentials, making sociolinguistic competence a critical determinant of social legitimacy.

Contemporary sociolinguistics conceptualizes sociolinguistic competence as the capacity to understand and produce variable language patterns in context-sensitive ways. This competence involves adjusting speech to align with interlocutors through strategies such as convergence and accommodation (Wirtz et al., 2024). Recent scholarship further emphasizes that identity is constructed interactionally through linguistic practice rather than existing as a fixed internal attribute (LaScotte, 2025; Toan, 2024). As a result, identities emerge dynamically in social encounters, shaped by how speakers deploy linguistic resources to position themselves and are recognized by others.

The biographical film *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), directed by Steven Spielberg, provides a compelling narrative for examining these sociolinguistic processes. The film portrays Frank Abagnale Jr., a teenager who successfully impersonates a Pan Am pilot, a hospital physician, and a Louisiana attorney before the age of nineteen, despite lacking formal qualifications (Lyen, 2024). Each assumed role requires Frank to modify his language in ways that align with professional expectations and institutional norms. His success illustrates how linguistic performance can function as a primary mechanism for gaining acceptance within professional communities, a phenomenon also observed in studies of institutional impersonation fraud (Liu et al., 2024).

Within sociolinguistics, register is a central concept used to explain how language varies according to context, profession, and social setting. Recent advances in register theory demonstrate that variation extends beyond lexical choice to include grammatical patterns, discourse organization, and prosodic features that signal social meaning (Herlina & Simatupang, 2024). Professional registers, in particular, are characterized by specialized vocabulary and authoritative discourse markers that index expertise and legitimacy. Research shows that speakers strategically deploy these features to perform identities, with register variation serving both responsive and intentional identity work (Burnett et al., 2024).

Relatedly, code-switching and speech accommodation play significant roles in professional identity construction. Code-switching allows speakers to alternate between linguistic varieties to position themselves relative to specific social groups and institutional roles (Beatty-Martinez et al., 2020). Speech accommodation theory further explains how convergent adaptation toward interlocutor norms reduces social distance and enhances acceptance, particularly in high-stakes professional interactions (Parekh et al., 2020). Successful participation in professional communities therefore requires not only adopting appropriate registers but also continuously adjusting language across lexical, pragmatic, and interactional levels.

Although several scholars have examined *Catch Me If You Can* from linguistic and pragmatic perspectives, existing studies tend to focus on isolated aspects such as speech acts, deception strategies, conversational implicature, or general themes of identity (Huang, 2022;



Lyen, 2024; Apriyanto, 2022). Studies on language functions highlight how speakers manipulate referential, conative, emotive, and phatic functions to achieve persuasive goals (Abalkheel & Sourani, 2023), while pragmatic analyses reveal how Frank strategically avoids explicit falsehoods through ambiguity (Cahyanti, 2022; Huang, 2022). However, there remains a noticeable gap in systematic sociolinguistic analysis that compares how Frank's language shifts across different professional registers and how these shifts contribute to the construction of credible professional identities. In other words, the relationship between register variation, language function, and identity performance across multiple professional contexts has not been comprehensively explored.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how Frank Abagnale Jr. varies his language across professional roles, the language functions most frequently employed in each identity, and what these linguistic choices reveal about power relations and identity construction. The study also examines how the film's narrative structure shapes audience understanding of these linguistic performances (Apriyanto, 2022). By integrating analysis of register shifts, accommodation strategies, and functional language use, this research offers a comprehensive sociolinguistic account of professional impersonation. This contribution is particularly relevant in light of contemporary concerns about identity fraud and the role of language in establishing professional legitimacy, thereby advancing theoretical understanding of professional identity as a performative and linguistically constructed phenomenon (Liu et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach using sociolinguistic analysis to investigate language use in professional interactional contexts. The research data are treated as textual material and analyzed contextually based on the situations in which utterances occur. The unit of analysis consists of the main character's spoken utterances that appear in professional settings and are directly related to identity performance. This approach enables systematic examination of linguistic variation and communicative functions without relying on statistical measurement.

The primary data source is the film *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), with analysis focusing on scenes in which Frank Abagnale Jr. performs professional roles as a pilot, doctor, and lawyer. Data were collected through repeated viewings of the 141-minute film to identify interactional contexts relevant to professional communication. Scene selection followed specific criteria, including explicit role performance, formal interaction with other characters, and the presence of linguistic indicators of register shift. Selected dialogues were transcribed verbatim, accompanied by notes on situational context, participant roles, and communicative intentions.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages using transcription sheets and linguistic analysis tables as analytical instruments. The initial stage involved identifying linguistic features such as lexical choice, level of formality, sentence patterns, and interactional strategies. These features were then categorized thematically to reveal recurring patterns of register use and language function across professional roles. Data credibility was ensured through repeated data examination, cross-referencing with relevant sociolinguistic literature, and transparent presentation of analytical procedures to support the reliability of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results demonstrate that Frank Abagnale Jr. systematically adapts his language use across three professional identities pilot, doctor, and lawyer by employing register-specific linguistic features. These adaptations are evident in lexical selection, syntactic structure, tone, and communicative strategy. The findings are based on analysis of selected utterances produced in professional interactional contexts. The presentation below describes each professional register separately, followed by a comparative summary.

Pilot Register

When impersonating a Pan Am pilot, Frank consistently uses aviation-related terminology and concise utterances that reflect operational communication norms. In an interaction with a flight attendant, the following exchange occurs:

Flight Attendant: "Can I get you anything, Captain?"

Frank: "Just a cup of coffee, black. And could you let the captain know I'm deadheading back to New York? I'll be up front if he needs anything."

The use of the term *deadheading* and the reference to being "up front" indicate familiarity with airline procedures and pilot positioning. Similar features appear in informal interaction with fellow pilots:

Pilot 1: "You flying the Paris route?"

Frank: "Yeah, just got back yesterday. Transatlantic, 707. Beautiful bird."

Pilot 2: "How's she handling?"

Frank: "Smooth as silk. Hit some chop over Newfoundland but nothing the old girl couldn't handle."

These utterances show the use of aircraft references and pilot vernacular that align with professional aviation discourse.

Doctor Register

In the medical context, Frank's language reflects institutional hierarchy and procedural orientation rather than direct clinical authority. When questioned by a hospital administrator, he responds as follows:

Administrator: "Dr. Connors, I don't see you on the rounds schedule."

Frank: "I'm supervising the pediatric residents this month. More of an administrative rotation. I'll be reviewing charts and observing procedures, but Dr. Ashland handles the direct patient contact."

Here, Frank employs terms related to medical hierarchy and administration to justify his role. In a more demanding situation, a nurse seeks his decision:

Nurse: "Doctor, the patient in 4B is complaining of chest pain. Should I order an EKG?"

Frank: "What are his vitals?"

Nurse: "BP 140 over 90, pulse 88."

Frank: "Yeah, go ahead and get that EKG. Let me know what it shows and we'll go from there."

This interaction illustrates Frank's reliance on clarifying questions and delegated decision-making to maintain professional credibility.

Lawyer Register

Frank's legal impersonation is characterized by formal language and abstract terminology associated with legal education and institutional credentials. While preparing for the bar examination, he engages in the following exchange:

Law Student: "You taking the bar next month?"

Frank: "Yeah, third time's a charm, right? Just trying to nail down personal jurisdiction and long-arm statutes."

Later, after joining a law firm, the following dialogue occurs:

Attorney: "So you passed the Louisiana bar?"

Frank: "Just barely. Didn't think I'd make it after that essay on habeas corpus."

These utterances show the use of legal vocabulary combined with modest self-positioning to signal legitimacy while managing expectations.

Cross-Register Comparison

The analysis across the three professional contexts reveals consistent yet differentiated patterns of linguistic adaptation. Each register displays distinctive combinations of vocabulary, sentence structure, tone, and communicative function that correspond to professional norms and expectations. Although the surface features of each register differ, all three identities rely on strategic alignment with institutional discourse conventions to achieve acceptance by interlocutors. To provide a clear and systematic overview of these patterns, the key linguistic features observed in each professional register are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Linguistic Features Across Professional Registers

Linguistic Dimension	Pilot Register	Doctor Register	Lawyer Register
Lexical choice	Aviation jargon (<i>deadheading, 707, chop</i>)	Medical terms (<i>vitals, EKG, rounds, pediatric residents</i>)	Legal vocabulary (<i>jurisdiction, habeas corpus, bar exam</i>)
Syntax	Short, direct sentences	Moderately complex with hedging	Formal, qualified statements
Tone	Confident, authoritative	Cautious, measured	Careful, deferential
Authority construction	Operational competence	Hierarchical positioning	Credential display
Primary language function	Referential, conative	Conative, phatic	Referential, metalingual
Risk strategy	Decisive assertion	Delegation tactics	Strategic ambiguity

As shown in Table 1, each professional role is associated with a distinct configuration of linguistic features that support Frank's acceptance within that context. Despite differences across registers, a consistent pattern of alignment with expected professional norms is evident. These findings indicate that Frank's impersonations are sustained through systematic and context-sensitive register variation. It should be noted that these findings represent dominant patterns identified within the selected data and do not claim to exhaustively capture all possible linguistic variations present throughout the film.



Discussion

Register Variation and Professional Identity Construction

The findings indicate that Frank's ability to successfully impersonate various professionals relies heavily on sophisticated register variation tailored to specific institutional contexts. His use of authoritative declaratives and directive structures in aviation settings reflects the communicative norms of cockpit discourse, where clarity and decisiveness are essential for operational safety (Lyen, 2024). This observation is consistent with contemporary register research which emphasizes that professional registers extend beyond technical vocabulary to include grammatical patterns, discourse organization, and prosodic features that index social roles and situational expectations (Herlina & Simatupang, 2024). Rather than shifting between entirely separate language systems, Frank demonstrates sensitivity to subtle gradations of formality and technicality, aligning with Burnett et al. (2024), who conceptualize register variation as strategic navigation across discursive worlds for identity construction. In this sense, Frank's linguistic adaptability functions as a key resource for achieving professional legitimacy in the absence of formal credentials.

Aviation discourse in the film simultaneously fulfills multiple communicative functions that reinforce Frank's insider status. Referentially, it conveys technical knowledge related to aircraft operations and flight procedures through specialized terminology. Conatively, it enables Frank to issue requests and directives that position him within the professional hierarchy, while phatically it fosters solidarity with other airline personnel through shared jargon and informal insider references (Abalkheel & Sourani, 2023). From a metalinguistic perspective, fluency in aviation discourse conventions signals professional competence and reinforces group membership. These findings resonate with Attenborough and Abbott's (2018) argument that professional identity is constructed through everyday practices, including language use, rather than solely through formal certification, highlighting how linguistic performance itself becomes a marker of professional belonging.

Code-Switching and Accommodation Strategies

Frank's linguistic behavior also demonstrates systematic code-switching between professional and casual registers depending on interactional context and interlocutor status. His ability to alternate between formal terminology and informal insider slang supports the view that code-switching functions not only as a responsive mechanism but also as strategic identity work that allows speakers to position themselves within social categories and communities (Beatty-Martínez et al., 2020). By closely monitoring audience expectations and adjusting his language accordingly, Frank exemplifies what sociolinguistic research describes as audience design and opportunistic deployment of linguistic resources. This adaptability underscores the active and intentional nature of sociolinguistic competence rather than treating it as an automatic reflection of identity.

In addition to code-switching, Frank consistently employs convergent accommodation by aligning his speech with the linguistic norms of his interlocutors across lexical, pragmatic, and interactional levels. He mirrors professional jargon used by pilots, adopts clinical terminology introduced by medical staff, and follows legal discourse conventions in juridical settings (Apriyanto, 2022). Such convergence reduces social distance and minimizes suspicion, supporting speech accommodation theory which posits that adapting to interlocutor norms facilitates social integration and credibility (Parekh et al., 2020). Notably, moments of linguistic deviation tend to occur under emotional pressure, suggesting that maintaining appropriate



register requires sustained cognitive effort. This supports Wirtz et al.'s (2024) view of sociolinguistic competence as an ongoing performance shaped by contextual demands.

Language Functions, Power, and Identity Performance

Frank's linguistic performances also illustrate how language functions as a mechanism for negotiating power and authority within professional interactions. Drawing on Jakobson's functional framework, his utterances simultaneously fulfill referential, conative, phatic, and metalingual functions, allowing him to manage information exchange, direct behavior, establish rapport, and signal professional expertise (Abalkheel & Sourani, 2023). The effective orchestration of these functions aligns with Walker and Caprar's (2020) notion of performance-based identity, in which repeated and meaningful performances contribute to self-definition. Frank's reliance on confident declaratives, directive speech acts, and specialized terminology enables him to claim institutional authority and discourage challenges to his legitimacy. These strategies reflect broader sociolinguistic insights into how identities and power relations emerge interactionally through linguistic positioning (O'Reilly et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, Frank's case supports contemporary views of identity as performative rather than fixed. Lloyd (2021) argues that linguistic performativity extends into social performance, whereby repeated discursive acts contribute to the enactment of social roles and identities. Frank's repeated professional impersonations demonstrate how sustained linguistic performance can temporarily stabilize a social identity, even in the absence of formal institutional recognition. This aligns with LaScotte's (2025) assertion that identities are products of semiotic practice rather than pre-existing psychological traits. Consequently, being recognized as a pilot, doctor, or lawyer in the film depends largely on the successful enactment of expected linguistic behaviors associated with those roles.

Narrative Structure and Linguistic Perception

The film's flashback narrative structure further shapes audience interpretation of Frank's linguistic performances. By alternating between scenes of past deception and present-day FBI interrogation, the narrative creates dramatic irony in which viewers are aware of Frank's true identity while other characters accept his professional claims (Apriyanto, 2022). This narrative strategy foregrounds the power of linguistic performance in constructing social reality, as professional legitimacy is granted based on how convincingly Frank sounds rather than who he actually is. The structure also allows viewers to observe the gradual refinement of Frank's linguistic competence, with later impersonations displaying greater register control and interactional sophistication (Huang, 2022).

This use of film as analytical data aligns with sociolinguistic research on language representation in media. Golchinnezhad and Afrouz (2022) demonstrate that films provide rich sites for examining how language constructs social identities and cultural expectations through scripted interaction. In *Catch Me If You Can*, professional registers are not only narrative devices but also reflections of socially shared beliefs about how professionals are expected to speak. Frank's evolving linguistic performances thus illustrate how sociolinguistic competence develops through exposure, imitation, and practice. Taken together, these findings highlight the central role of language in mediating identity, authority, and social boundary crossing within both cinematic representation and broader social interaction.



CONCLUSION

This study ultimately demonstrates that the effectiveness of Frank Abagnale Jr.'s professional impersonations in *Catch Me If You Can* is rooted in his sociolinguistic competence rather than in formal education or institutional authorization. The findings reveal that professional identity can be enacted and recognized as legitimate through strategic language use that aligns with contextual norms and expectations. By skillfully manipulating register, adapting to interlocutors, and deploying language functions appropriately, Frank constructs identities that are socially accepted within specific institutional settings. This confirms that professional legitimacy is not inherently fixed but is dynamically negotiated through interaction.

Moreover, the study highlights that successful identity performance depends on the integrated deployment of linguistic resources across multiple levels, including lexical choice, syntactic structure, pragmatic intent, and prosodic control. Frank's consistent use of accommodative strategies reduces interpersonal distance and reinforces trust, allowing him to maintain credibility even in environments characterized by high scrutiny. These findings underscore that professional communication extends beyond the transmission of information to include the management of authority, relational alignment, and impression formation. From a sociolinguistic perspective, identity performance becomes particularly salient in contexts where minor linguistic deviations can result in immediate social disqualification.

Finally, the narrative structure of the film reinforces the argument that professional identity is socially constructed and progressively refined through linguistic practice. The use of flashbacks enables the audience to observe how repeated exposure, imitation, and experiential learning contribute to the development of Frank's communicative competence. This opens avenues for future research to compare similar linguistic strategies across different cinematic representations or real-world cases of impersonation. Additionally, the findings offer practical implications for studies of professional communication, identity formation, and critical awareness, particularly in understanding how linguistic authority can be constructed, maintained, and potentially manipulated within institutional contexts.

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