

# EXTENDED ESSAY

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## English B

“To what extent are the mob languages responsible for the rise and success of ethnically based organized crime in the U.S. from late 19th century to early 20th century?”

## **ABSTRACT**

Mob language studies have seen various attempts at explaining the major effect of the use of this specific language and its contribution to the rise of Mafia in the USA. Different scholars, writers and researchers have variously emphasized the role of crime subcultures and their unique vernaculars in the U.S. In this paper, I would like to report on an even more ambitious claim that the rise organized crime in the U.S. would have not been possible were it not to the wielding of specific mob languages.

The goal of the paper is to analyze the selection and use of special vocabulary to bind organized crime members together and avoid the governmental and judiciary control. This paper aims to show how mob languages developed as fusion languages resulting from the interaction of English with the experiences of different groups of people at different times.

Crime usually results from socio-economic despair and dissatisfaction. We usually come across these two factors as an end product of immigrant stories and ostracism of different ethnic and socio-economic groups within a society. Out of this situation evolves many things: literature, songs, movies and arts related to this feeling of being the “outcasts”. However, lack of opportunities, feeling of alienation and despair also result in a tendency towards crime. When this situation of becoming the “outcast” occurs to any group, the group’s self-identification changes with its specific circumstances and gives rise to a specific language and culture that is self-evident in various cultural artifacts related to the group. When criminal tendencies permeate the group, this development of language and culture results in the development of a mob language that in return brings about many advantages for organized crime. As far as my research is concerned, my conclusion is that the creation of specific mob languages in the organized crime scene of U.S. has greatly shaped the successes of these criminal organizations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Organized crime is a major social issue in the United States. It harms the youth, damages the economy, causes social breakdown and disrupts community life. In short, it negatively affects all aspects of life in the U.S.

First of all, I believe that a definition of organized crime is necessary. “The FBI defines organized crime as any group having some manner of a formalized structure and whose primary objective is to obtain money through illegal activities. Such groups maintain their position through the use of actual or threatened violence, corrupt public officials, graft, or extortion, and generally have a significant impact on the people in their locales, region, or the country as a whole” (The Federal Bureau of Investigation).

Different people have attributed different reasons for the appearance and persistence of organized crime in the U.S. To give an example, according to Robert K. Merton, in the U.S., “...it is believed that people who work hard can succeed no matter what their starting point in life. This idea is not in fact valid, because most disadvantaged people have limited conventional opportunities for advancement or none at all. Yet those who do not “succeed” are condemned for their apparent inability to make material progress. Thus there is pressure to get ahead by any means, legitimate or illegitimate” (qtd. in Giddens et al. 194).

Such discrepancy between the norms of society and actual reality, many a times resulting from discrimination towards ethnic minorities, almost always results in the development of a separate identity and culture. Out of this “outcast” culture grows organized crime and mob languages. The aim of this investigation is to argue that the development of specific mob languages greatly affected the formation and enhanced the success of ethnically based organized crime in the U.S.

My research question is as follows: “To what extent are the mob languages responsible for the rise and success of ethnically based organized crime in the U.S. from late 19th century

to early 20th century?” In order to answer my question, I will analyze major ethnic groups in the U.S. that have been associated with organized crime. These are namely Irish Americans, Italian Americans and Jewish Americans. I will examine the formation of mob languages within these ethnically based organized crime groups and how they manifest themselves. I will do this in a chronological order by considering the immigration of these ethnic groups to the U.S.

This essay in no way tries to imply that certain ethnic groups are more prone to crime than others. This essay merely tries to understand the effect of mob languages on organized crime in the U.S. from late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **THE IRISH MOB**

The Irish started arriving at the U.S. after the Great Potato Famine in 1840s (O'Connor). “William H. A. Williams writes: Irish Catholics were in many respects the first ‘ethnic’ group in America . . . the first immigrant group to arrive in extremely large numbers, to gain high visibility by clustering in cities . . . , and to appear sufficiently ‘different’ in religion and culture so that acceptance by native-born Americans was not automatic, and assimilation was, therefore, prolonged” (qtd. in Eckard). During such prolonged assimilation, lack of legitimate means of social mobility resulted in the formation of Irish Mob.

Since the emergence of Irish Mob predates the advent of mass media, not many accounts of their original usage of mob language are easily accessible. However, we may still be able to trace their tradition and mob language, which is a sub culture of the Irish-American culture, via certain cultural artifacts. Analyzing a section of the lyrics for the song “Black Shamrock” from the Los Angeles based band The Mighty Regis might give us a clearer picture (SeekLyrics.com):

*Lyrics to Black Shamrock :*

*Won't read about 'em in any book*

*Paddy's from the kitchen in Hell*

*Working the roofs in old Red Hook*

*Where many a good man fell*

*More hits than the New York Yankees*

*Since they landed on this shore*

*Type of mob this fair country*

*Has never seen before*

In the lyrics, the word “Paddy” is a derogatory name used to address an Irish man (Oxford University Press). In this sense, it reflects the discrimination against the Irish. In the context of the lyrics, we can clearly see that the song is talking about an Irishman from “the kitchen in Hell. “The kitchen in Hell” refers to “Hell’s Kitchen”, a neighborhood in Manhattan, New York, which was, historically, the home of poor Irish-Americans in New York and a major center for Irish American organized crime. Although several explanations exist for the origins of the name “Hell’s Kitchen”, almost all of them place the time frame of the etymology of the word to the arrival of the Irish to the U.S. in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “Red Hook” also refers to a neighborhood in New York that was home to Irish American organized crime groups. With “more hits than the New York Yankees” and specifically the word “hits” suggests an alternative for killings and draws a parallel with baseball, which was also a means of social mobility like organized crime.

From the lyrics, we acquire important information. First of all, we learn about the turfs of the Irish Mob. It is important to note that the phrase “Hell’s Kitchen” might not have been coined by the Irish Mob itself. However, even if that was the case, it shows an important

aspect of mob language when examined under labeling theory. “Labeling theory is an approach to the study of deviance that suggests that people become “deviant” because certain labels are attached to their behavior by political authorities and others” (Giddens et al. 197). For example, one explanation for the origin of the phrase ascribes it to a police officer who was watching the riots in the area (Klara Madlin Real Estate Inc.). According to the labeling theory, the fact that an Irishman is from “Hell’s Kitchen” may have negative connotations. In this sense, the mob language, adopting the phrase “Hell’s Kitchen” (even if it wasn’t necessarily created by it), creates itself a unique environment where it forms an identity of “being from the Hell’s Kitchen”. This usage of mob language helps the Irish Mob grow an emotional and mental connection to both the members of the crime group and to the turf.

## **ITALIAN AMERICAN MAFIA**

As a result of Italian Unification, many Italians from South Italy immigrated to the United States for better opportunities and Italians started to replace the Irish as the outcast ethnic group of the American society during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Italian American Mafia reached its current level of international fame when the US Constitution proscribed the sale, production and transportation of alcoholic beverages in 1920s. At this period, called “Prohibition Era”, the Mafia got enticed by booming liquor business and initiated intricate and complex criminal activities. In a short time, it gained considerable skills and experiences in smuggling, money laundering and bribing public authorities. This profitable enterprise allured many Sicilian mafia members to the USA to get involved in bootlegging and integrate their efforts with those already in place by paving the road for fledgling Italian American Mafia.

The Italian American Mafia, which was often the target of FBI wire-taps, required its own anti-language (McLucas). Therefore, the Mafia opted for code words to conceal its actions and movements from jurisdiction and police. To circumvent police surveillance, the Mafia chose to resort to an evasive and secretive language and invented a series of words to confuse law enforcers. For example, the words such as “*whacked, erased, burned, clipped, iced, or hit*” would mean to kill someone who showed disrespect (McLucas).

“It is not unusual in FBI wiretap transcriptions of Mafia conversations for the word *fuck* to appear up to five and six times in a single sentence” (McLucas). Since the Mafia included obscenity in its jargon so frequently, those words lost their effect. This situation can be comparable to standard overuse of words in our daily life such as *very, really, and so*. Without the addition of novel profane expressions, recurrence and reiteration of obscene vernacular will remain crucial because only through this way can these words substantiate their original and intended meanings (McLucas).

“Rule number one in the mafia: Don't talk about anything on the phone” (McLucas). However, a phone is a very useful means of communication which a business like that of Al Capone would surely require. The Mafia was well aware of the fact that phone conversations were listened and tapped. Therefore, the gang members would use their unique jargon to overcome this handicap (McLucas). For example, according to FBI transcriptions of phone tap, Al Capone's two members named Mazzei and Hill exchanged the following sentences (Pileggi 245):

MAZZEI: You know the golf club and the dogs you gave me in return?

HILL: Yeah.

MAZZEI: Can you still do that?

HILL: Same kind of golf club?



MAZZEI: No. No golf clubs. Can you still give me the dogs if I pay for the golf clubs?

HILL: Yeah. Sure.

MAZZEI: You front me the shampoo and I'll front you the dog pills...What time tomorrow?

HILL: Any time after twelve.

MAZZEI: You won't hold my lady friend up?

HILL: No.

MAZZEI: Somebody will just exchange dogs.

The abovementioned conversation represents in fact a drug deal between two members in Pittsburgh. Since the dialogue develops around absurd use of sentences, this wire-tapping was considered as an evidence for a supposedly illegal deal although there is no mention of drugs. Of course, during the recording, the police officers did understand what was being said. Similar tape recordings revealed many other jargon and idiosyncratic use of sentences. For example, Hill used peculiar words such as "opals", "stones", "buds", "karats", "OZ", "whole", "quarter", "half", and "one-for-two" in his dealings to protect himself against legal undertaking. The use of those words proves that the Mafia knows well the loopholes in the law and does its best to circumvent any possible obstacles. They know that they cannot be prosecuted on the basis of the use of *innocent* words such as "dog pills" and "golf clubs" (Pileggi 244).

Italian American Mafia was perhaps the most defining organized crime group ever existed. The word "Mafia" which is now used to refer to almost all organized crime groups in the U.S. is perhaps their most important contribution through their mob language.

## **JEWISH AMERICAN ORGANIZED CRIME**

With rising anti-Semitism all across Europe, the U.S. was a safe haven for Jews of Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe. Even though the history of American Jews predates the pogroms and subsequent fleeing during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the rise of Jewish American organized crime groups coincides with large scale immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe.

When Jews from Eastern Europe arrived at the New World the paths of education and legitimate means of social mobility were closed to them. This was due to several reasons: First of all, unlike the rest of the Jews who arrived prior to them, Jews from Eastern Europe arrived en masse, drawing the attention of the general public. Second, the Jews from Eastern Europe faced a heavy language barrier. They mainly spoke Yiddish, and most spoke, as a second language, other languages of Eastern Europe, like Ukrainian, Russian, etc., so there was clearly a language barrier. Third, like the catholic Irish and Italian, their religion made them stand out among the protestant Americans. As explored in previous examples of ethnic groups, such a situation is the perfect breeding ground for the rise of organized crime.

Jewish American organized crime groups coexisted and competed with Italian American Mafia, as the arrival of both ethnic groups to the United States was at about the same time. Jewish criminals formed such organizations as Yiddish Black Hand and Murder Inc. and certain Jewish American organized crime figures like Meyer Lansky and Louis “Lepke” Buchalter achieved a high level of notoriety in the U.S. organized crime scene.

However, the upper class Jews of the New York Jewish community disdained the activities of all these groups because they fuelled anti-Semitism in public, who came about to view these newly arrived Eastern European émigrés as the source of all crime and decadence in New York, as evidenced by the words of Theodore A. Bingham: “Wherefore it is not astonishing that with a million Hebrews, mostly Russian, in the city (one quarter of its population), perhaps half the criminals should be of that race....”

—New York City Police Commissioner Theodore A. Bingham (New Voices). As a result, the Jewish community leaders in New York entrusted Abraham Shoenfeld, a private investigator, with a mission to infiltrate and collect information on the extent to which Jews were involved in organized crime (Miller). His ventures not only provided deeper insights into the nature of Jewish American organized crime, but also into the slang of Jewish American organized crime.

Like the previous ethnically based organized crime groups, Jewish American organized crime groups also developed their own mob language, drawing heavily from Yiddish, a language comprised of the fusion of Hebrew with German, and spoken mainly by Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of Eastern and Northern Europe).

Below are a few examples from Jewish American mob language that Abraham Shoenfeld came across in his investigations that I will analyze in order to better understand the mob language used by Jewish-American organized crime groups (New Voices):

- Simcha — Pimp. (Man's name in Hebrew. Literally means "Joyous celebration," such as a wedding or bar mitzvah).
- Nafke bias — Whorehouse
- Booster — Female specialist in pilfering from department stores.
- Schlamme – Strong-arm man. (From the practice of beating a victim with a length of pipe rolled up in a newspaper).
- Guerilla — Strong arm man, enforcer.
- Shtarke — Strong-arm man (from Yiddish "shtark" for "strong").
- Doorman — One who warns gamblers or brothel-keepers of trouble.
- Chanele — Tender-hearted prostitute. (Diminutive of "Chana," and possibly a play on "Chonte"—Yiddish for "prostitute").

- Cadet — Pimp.
- Mack — Pimp.

I have intentionally kept this list long, as I believe it gives us valuable information about the nature of mob language and its associated culture as it existed in Jewish American organized crime. “Simcha” and “Nafke bias” are definitely words of Yiddish origin, “Booster” is a word of English origin. This suggests that in addition to conversing in Yiddish, the mob language of Jewish American organized crime groups made use of a distinct lexicon of English words to communicate between its members.

In addition, it is important to note the types of words present in the list. In other words, the mob language of Jewish organized crime accurately reflects the degrees to which they were involved in different areas of organized crime. For example, “simcha”, “cadet” and “mack” are all words for “pimp”. In a way, this shows the area of specialization of Jewish American organized crime. “Nafke bias”, “doorman” and “Chanele” are all words that have connections to prostitution.

Another essential facet of the slang glossary above is its hints towards the anti-culture formed within the Jewish American organized crime groups. Lionel Trilling writes that “the Jew conceived his own ideal character to consist in his being intellectual, pacific, and humane” (qtd. in Grant). Primo Levi also notes, in an interview with Philip Roth, that “... a Jew is a mild person, a scholar (religious or profane), unwarlike, humiliated, who tolerated centuries of persecution without ever fighting back.” (qtd. in Grant). These attributes are in stark contrast to the members of Jewish-American organized crime. “Schlamme”, “Guerilla” and “Shtarke” are all words that represent aggressiveness, violence and poignancy, which are not at all in line with both the self-image and stereotypes of Jews in that era, as noted by Levi and Trilling. Facing anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination, Jewish immigrant youth

living in poorer neighborhoods perhaps thought of these gangsters as some sort of role models. This situation, in return, might have both created a sharper division between mainstream Jewish communities and, more importantly, helped Jewish gangsters recruit more easily into their ranks and assume a role akin to that of a super hero within the context of their sub-culture.

When Fascism and, in particular, Nazism started to rise in Europe and spilled over into the U.S., Meyer Lansky (one of the most powerful crime lords in the U.S. to have ever lived) and his gangsters fought viciously against the rising American Nazi threat. Lansky recalls that “We wanted to show them that Jews would not always sit back and accept insults” (Moorsehead Magazines Limited 36). With their unique sub-culture and mob language, it is no wonder that the Jewish-American organized crime thrived and left a rich history of success in organized crime business.

## **MOB LANGUAGES AND THEIR EFFECTS**

In the previous sections, I have tried to analyze several examples of mob languages that I have found to be present in different organized crime groups in the U.S. that have had ethnic bases. By ethnic bases, I mean those organized crime groups that we may classify under sub headings like “Irish Mob”, “Italian American Mafia”, etc.

My thesis is that these mob languages affected and resulted in the success of organized crime among these groups. However, it is hard to say that the effect was achieved through the same means in all of these groups, as language has multiple ways of interacting with any given group. For example, Jaspal points out that language is not only a means of communication, but also a way in which an individual or a group can set itself apart from others and distinguish itself (17).

First and foremost, it is no wonder that language helped these organized crime groups keep their activities a secret. This vigilance for who hears what does not only exist for the police and other outsiders, though. In the case of Jewish gangster, for example, they also succeeded in hiding their activities from their children and keeping them away from crime: “the men in wide-lapelled suits with bulging waistbands made sure their own kids went to law school” (Grant).

However, Halliday rejects the idea that these mob languages grew out of a need for confidentiality, arguing instead that secrecy is a feature of these anti languages, rather than a cause (572). So, out of what purpose did these mob languages grow, or, in other words, what purpose do mob languages serve in addition to providing secrecy? Halliday asserts that these mob languages created and shaped a distinct social structure of criminals, in which exist “systems of values, sanctions, rewards and punishments” and varying degrees of social stratification (573), akin to that of a normal society. Such a formation is something that we frequently come across in organized crime groups, where there is little room for democracy and equality, and social stratification is much more apparent than in our contemporary societies. From dispensable and subordinate street thugs to vicious crime bosses like Al Capone, the mob languages of these groups are self-evident in their anti-societies.

In addition, the role of language as an enforcer of group identity has long been studied. These crime groups engaged in highly dangerous activities, and, in order to cooperate and work effectively under any and all conditions, they had to have strong relations between them, albeit violent and aggressive at times. For instance, Italian American mafia had a designated code of honor called “Omertà” that strictly forbid members of the organized crime group from disclosing any information to the outside world.

Moreover, it is important to note that “...Language can be a robust marker of social identity; capable of binding and dividing groups and that its salience may displace other (e.g.

ethnic or religious) identities” (qtd. in Jaspal 17). In the case of Jewish-American organized crime, the members of this group used mob language to both bind themselves together, and displace a certain degree of Jewish identity from the group so as to allow them to work efficiently without any scruples resulting from a clash between the Jewish and criminal identities.

## CONCLUSION

Thomas Szasz once said “Man is the animal that speaks. Understanding language is thus the key to understanding man” (Lagemaat 47). In this essay, I have tried to understand how the rise and success of ethnically based organized crime in the U.S. from late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century is connected to the development of mob languages through an analysis of the languages of the gangsters.

In this conclusion section, I will try to, in the light of the rest of my essay, answer my research question: *“To what extent are the mob languages responsible for the rise and success of ethnically based organized crime in the U.S. from late 19th century to early 20th century?”*

It is no wonder that, as a result of their ethnic groups’ immigrant status and subcultures formed from despair, the organized crime groups that I have explored in this essay have developed some forms of mob languages, perhaps to varying degrees. The fact that there exist glossaries, songs and FBI recorded phone conversations showcasing mob languages corroborates the development of mob languages.

In addition to having multiple benefits, the socio-linguistic aspects of mob languages demonstrate a direct correlation between the formations of group identity, which may be an effective way for organized crime groups in the U.S. to recruit into their ranks.

Also, this essay did not fully explore the experiences of immigrant communities in the U.S. that may give rise to organized crime. Please bear in mind that the previous sentence is not to suggest an implication germane to “alien conspiracy theories”, which form an understanding that all evil comes from foreigners within a community. Rather, this is to say that perhaps certain unique aspects of U.S. culture has a direct, negative influence on the experiences of immigrants. For example, one might argue that the free-market capitalism of U.S. is more prone to organized crime than, say, the more social democrat ways of European states.

Indeed, this essay set forth certain questions that would be entertaining to explore. Does U.S. have something special about it that makes it more prone to ethnically based organized crime (since it has produced world famous examples in this respect: Irish Mob, Italian-American Mafia and Jewish American organized crime) than, say, the UK? If so, what are these aspects that make it more prone to organized crime? If not, then could it be due to U.S. culture gaining more momentum and thus better communicating its experiences to the world than other cultures? Therefore, I think it would be very interesting to research these questions that I believe could greatly complement my essay.



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