

# Linguistic Identity and Social Roles in the Film *Green Book*

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how language reflects and negotiates cultural identity, power, and social relations through an ethnographic analysis of communication in the 2018 film *Green Book*. The research is grounded in the need to understand how communication functions as a bridge across cultural and racial divisions, particularly in media representations set within historically segregated contexts. Employing a qualitative content analysis design, the study applies Dell Hymes' S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model to analyze the main character's communicative practices throughout the film. Focusing on three key components—setting, participants, and ends—the analysis reveals a significant transformation in the character's speech, evolving from culturally insensitive and informal language toward more empathetic, respectful, and contextually appropriate communication. These changes reflect a broader process of identity negotiation and cultural awareness shaped by dynamic social interactions. The findings contribute to the field of sociolinguistics by illustrating how communicative competence is constructed and reshaped in intercultural contexts, and they also offer insights for media and cultural studies on how film can serve as a site for representing and critiquing social norms and values.

## I. Introduction

The movie "Green Book" (2018) does a great job showing what American culture was like in the 1960s, dealing with big topics like racial segregation, identity, and social class. It tells the story of Tony Vallelonga, an Italian-American driver, and Dr. Don Shirley, a super talented African American pianist, as they travel through the Southern US, where racial segregation was still very real. At first, their relationship is pretty tense because of all the cultural biases and social differences, but over time, it grows into a real friendship. It really shows how just talking to each other can build empathy and break down those cultural walls. "Green Book" is a fantastic way to look at how the way we communicate reflects and shapes our identity, power dynamics, and how we fit into society. To understand the communication in the film better, we can use Dell Hymes' ethnography of communication. Hymes [1] basically said that this field is about "analyzing communication within the bigger picture of a culture's or speech community's social and cultural practices and beliefs." This means that excellent communication is more than just stating the appropriate words; it also considers the context, who is engaged (their social roles), and what cultural expectations are in play. Saville-Troike [2] agrees, stating that because speech communities are formed by culture, we must examine language within the context of society. Lots of recent research in this area has looked at several related ideas. A lot of work has focused on multilingual communication and cultural negotiation. For example, Zakiah's [3] study of Polyglot Indonesia showed how people used code-switching (changing between languages), code-mixing (mixing languages), and even nonverbal cues to make everyone feel included. Various research have looked at traditional communication and rituals in

local communities. Karmilla's [4] study of the shifting madduppa tradition, for example, highlighted how social changes influence how people interact. Furthermore, study has examined how language and identity are portrayed in media. Sari [5] and Putra [6] used the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model to examine communication norms in Balinese wedding ceremonies and shadow puppet shows. Umar [7] and Nurfridayanti [8] demonstrated how this paradigm works in professional contexts as well as fictional ones, where communication is influenced by different cultures and storytelling styles. Even with all this great research, there hasn't been much ethnographic analysis of communication in movies that show different racial groups interacting. Specifically, not much attention has been paid to how a character's communication skills change as they experience different cultures and as power dynamics shift. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the main character's speech in "Green Book" using three parts of the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model: the setting, the participants, and the ends (or goals) of the communication. This will help us see how his language adapts to different social and cultural situations.

Past research on how people communicate, particularly through the lens of ethnography of communication and using the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model, has covered a wide array of topics. This includes everything from how people navigate multiple languages and traditional communication practices to the way we talk in media and how we express our social identity. A key takeaway from all these studies is just how crucial language is in helping us connect across different cultures. For instance, Zakiyah [3] researched the multilingual communication tactics used by members of "Polyglot Indonesia," and discovered that code-switching, code-mixing, and nonverbal clues all contributed considerably to cultural inclusion. Similarly, Umar [7] investigated professional contacts in a cross-cultural workplace, showing how informal yet effective communication between Indonesian and German coworkers represented communicative adaptability in multilingual environments. A major area of scholarly research has been focused on the preservation and evolution of traditional communication systems. Karmilla [7] researched the madduppa ritual in Sidrap Regency and discovered that while new technology, faiths, and cultural shifts have affected some of the procedures, the basic ideals have remained same. Sari [5] examined Balinese wedding proposals, demonstrating how culturally rooted communication standards, such as specific phrasing and language mixing, are passed down through generations.

The study of identity and cultural norms through diverse media, such as film, television, and literature, is an important topic of research. For example, Putra [6] examined moral discourse as presented in a Cenk Blonk shadow puppet film, shedding light on the cultural values entrenched in traditional narratives. Similarly, Nurfridayanti [8] examined the animated feature film Luca to better understand the relationship between communicative intentions and cultural dynamics in children's media. Furthermore, Veronica [9] investigated communication patterns within Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, emphasizing how character dialogue and interactions serve to reflect underlying social and cultural institutions. Complementing this line of investigation, Razzaq [10] demonstrated that in Karianwali, Pakistan, verbal directness is culturally esteemed as a marker of authenticity, often contrasted with politeness, which is frequently associated with urban insincerity. This corpus of research emphasizes the importance of media texts as a fertile ground for studying the development and negotiation of identity and cultural norms through communicative activities. Beyond these specific discoveries, other scholars attempted to improve the ethnography of communication framework itself. Pishghadam [11] created the E-SPEAKING model, which incorporates emotional aspects into speech analysis. Shavit [12] criticized existing models for ignoring motivational factors and proposed combining rational and cultural thinking. Huang [13] demonstrates how film subtitles convey nuanced cultural messages, highlighting the challenges of cross-cultural meaning transfer in animated films. Long [14] emphasizes that spatial and cultural environments in films often dictate character interactions, a concept mirrored in the way Tony adapts his communication in confined versus public settings. According to Feng and Wan Yahaya [15], intercultural narratives in animated films not only entertain but also serve as tools for cultural education, reflecting identity negotiation in a globalized media landscape. Liao [16] explores how films from different regions portray cultural values and stereotypes, offering insights into how communication reflects broader sociocultural ideologies. Though research on Green Book has occurred, such as Anas's [17] assessment of the relationship between language and social positions in certain scenes, few studies have looked at the progression of a character's linguistic capacity over time. The current study addresses this gap by examining the transformation of the main character's communication style in Green Book (2018). It uses Dell Hymes' S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model to examine

how setting, participants, and communicative goals influence language behavior in cross-cultural interactions.

While "Green Book" has been widely discussed from historical, cultural, and racial angles, not many researchers have really dug into how the characters' communication styles evolve throughout the film using a linguistic ethnographic approach. This study aims to fill that gap by taking a long-term look at how the main character's communication changes. We'll be using Dell Hymes' S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model, specifically focusing on the setting, the participants, and the outcomes of their conversations. Building on Saville-Troike's [2] idea that ethnography of communication is all about "analyzing communication within the bigger picture of a culture's or speech community's social and cultural practices and beliefs," this research explores how the character's verbal behavior shifts over time. This will show us how he grows personally, becomes more culturally aware, and navigates his own identity. The study is guided by the following research focus: it seeks to explore the various settings in which the character's communication occurs, to identify the participants involved in his interactions, and to analyze the communicative ends or objectives that emerge throughout the narrative.

This study significantly contributes to the broader field of communication ethnography by offering a concrete application of Hymes' theoretical framework to cinematic analysis. It specifically illuminates how film narratives can effectively portray the intricate intersection of language, identity, and culture. Furthermore, it reveals how communication ability evolves and adapts through encounters in various social circumstances. The findings of this study are expected to inform future research in media studies, sociolinguistics, and cultural studies, particularly in understanding how narratives reflect and represent individual and societal transformation through the dynamic use of language.

## **II. Method**

### *A. Research Design*

This study uses a qualitative ethnographic approach, which we've paired with content analysis. We've found Dell Hymes' ethnography of communication to be especially fitting because it highlights how deeply culture is woven into the way we speak. This method lets us explore how things like social norms, identity, and personal relationships within a community shape how language is used—all crucial elements in the communication changes we see in the movie *Green Book*. Qualitative content analysis allows for the systematic categorization and interpretation of textual data while retaining the depth and flexibility of qualitative inquiry. This approach enables the researcher to explore meaning beyond surface-level language, focusing on latent content and contextual cues that shape communication patterns [18]. Qualitative content analysis then complements this by offering a structured way to understand meaning from both what's said and the surrounding context, especially in stories told through film. As Krippendorff [19] explains, content analysis is essentially a research tool for drawing reliable and consistent conclusions from data while keeping its original context intact. Distinct from quantitative methodologies that prioritize frequency and metrics, qualitative content analysis emphasizes interpretive depth while maintaining procedural rigor.

### *B. Research Data and Data Source*

The primary data source for this investigation is the 2018 film *Green Book*, directed by Peter Farrelly. The researcher chose this 130-minute historical comedy-drama, set in the racially divided American South of the 1960s, because it vividly portrays cross-cultural interactions and human growth, especially through the character of Tony Vallelonga. To make sure our transcriptions were accurate, we also used the film's official script. Our focus was specifically on Tony's spoken words—his verbal utterances—which reveal shifts in his communication goals, cultural awareness, and how he relates to others.

### *C. Data Collection Procedure*

The researcher watched the film multiple times to fully grasp the story, how the characters developed, and their speech patterns. Then, the researcher used a purposive sampling method to pick out scenes where Tony had important conversations relevant to my study. The researcher paid close attention to parts of his dialogue that clearly showed changes in his tone, his communication goals,

and his cultural awareness. Tony's dialogue was accurately transcribed using playback capabilities that allowed me to pause and replay. To keep the emphasis clear during transcribing, the researcher removed any dialogue that was unrelated to the core encounter. Each chosen remark was then meticulously annotated using contextual information such as the setting, emotional tone, and who he was speaking with.

#### *D. Data Analysis Procedure*

The analytical process was guided by Dell Hymes' S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model, with a particular focus on the Ends component, which denotes the goals and outcomes of communication. Each utterance underwent analysis to ascertain its immediate communicative effect and its deeper relational or cultural purpose. Analytical parameters included: speech acts (e.g., expressive, directive, assertive), communicative functions (e.g., defending, persuading, rejecting, empathizing), interactional dynamics (e.g., authority, intimacy), and the social context in which each exchange occurred. In addition, the components Setting and Participants were used to further characterize the scene surroundings and interlocutors. This scientific technique aided in the identification of transformation patterns in Tony's communicative style, revealing how his changing language use corresponded to his personal growth and increased cultural understanding throughout the film.

### **III. Results and Discussion**

At the film's outset, Tony's communication style is boisterous, casual, and frequently offensive, especially in his exchanges with Dr. Don Shirley. His humor often relies on cultural clichés, indicating his constrained worldview and cultural viewpoint. Tony's pronounced Italian-American accent and habitual use of vulgar language accentuate his working-class origins, establishing a sharp contrast with Dr. Shirley's polished and eloquent speech.

As the novel advances, Tony's speech experiences a notable shift. Through his exposure to several social contexts and his evolving rapport with Dr. Shirley, Tony progressively embraces a more contemplative, patient, and respectful style of communicating. This transition signifies his personal development and underscores his heightened cultural understanding. By the film's conclusion, Tony's language transforms from a mechanism for exerting authority to a medium for cultivating authentic connection and comprehension.

#### *A. Setting in Green Book (2018)*

The settings in which the main character communicates play a crucial role in shaping his verbal behavior. At the beginning of the narrative, most of his conversations occur in informal, public, and often confrontational environments—such as his workplace, his home, or in diners—where his speech is loud, defensive, and marked by crude humor. These casual and male-dominated spaces reinforce his reliance on stereotypes and assertive expressions. However, as he begins the journey with Dr. Shirley, the confined setting of the car becomes a recurring communicative space. It functions both as a physical and symbolic container for introspection and transformation. In contrast to earlier settings, the car compels more intimate, prolonged dialogue, gradually shifting his communication style toward greater self-restraint and empathy. Formal settings like concert venues or upscale restaurants further challenge his cultural assumptions, pushing him to observe and adapt to new social cues. Tony's communicative style is heavily shaped by the environment in which he interacts. In the early scene at the Copacabana nightclub (00:03:28), Tony is portrayed in a chaotic and hostile setting where verbal interaction is secondary to physical assertiveness. The absence of formal dialogue when he removes an unruly patron—using minimal words and direct action—demonstrates a communication style grounded in dominance and survival. This reflects Razzaq's [10] findings that in some communities, directness or impoliteness is culturally embedded to express authenticity.

In contrast, when Tony first enters Dr. Shirley's opulent apartment above Carnegie Hall (00:14:47), he reacts with discomfort, commenting: "Some place you got in here." This awkward, non-eloquent remark signals Tony's unease in unfamiliar elite settings, highlighting class and cultural disparity. The structured setting influences the formal nature of communication, echoing Umar's [7] observation that context dictates communicative tone in cross-cultural professional settings. During the car scenes (00:51:32), which serve as a mobile neutral space, conversation

becomes more reflective and complex. In a discussion about fried chicken and Little Richard, Tony begins with stereotypes but gradually listens and reconsiders. This echoes Zakariah [3], who identified that language in multilingual communities evolves when exposed to repeated intercultural interactions. The car becomes a metaphorical space for transformation.

#### *B. Participants in Green Book (2018)*

Initially, the participant dynamic is hierarchical, with the main character adopting a dominant, sometimes dismissive role, especially when interacting with Dr. Shirley. He often interrupts, assumes familiarity, and relies on humor rooted in cultural clichés. His verbal style reflects working-class assertiveness, built around quick wit and emotional outbursts. Conversely, Dr. Shirley is formal, composed, and articulate—displaying communicative norms aligned with professionalism and cultural refinement. As their relationship deepens, this dynamic evolves. The once rigid boundary between employer and employee becomes increasingly blurred, and a reciprocal exchange emerges. The main character begins to listen more attentively, seeks feedback, and communicates with more consideration, signaling a shift in power and mutual respect. This change is not limited to Shirley; his interactions with strangers, authority figures, and even his wife reflect increased sensitivity and awareness of his audience. Tony's speech patterns and interactional style evolve in response to his interlocutors. Initially, his behavior with Black individuals, such as discarding glasses touched by a Black repairman (00:08:49), reflects ingrained prejudice. However, across the film, Tony's interactions with Dr. Shirley show progression.

From interrupting and mocking, he shifts to seeking guidance and listening, especially during letter-writing scenes. Shirley's statement, "Refinement does not equate to softness," shows his role as a corrective and mentoring figure. This evolution mirrors Sari's [5] analysis of how ritual communication in Balinese proposals reinforces status yet evolves with context. Tony's family also undergoes this shift: Dolores initially expresses skepticism but later says, "Thank you for helping him with the letters," signaling social acceptance. As Pishghadam [11] emphasized, emotional and relational dimensions are critical in understanding language shifts. Secondary participants, such as Southern police officers or white patrons, reinforce or challenge Tony's speech style. When confronted with racism in the South, Tony begins using language to defend rather than provoke. These participants mirror the formal yet condescending tone noted by Veronica [9] in her analysis of social power in scripted texts.

#### *C. Ends in Green Book (2018)*

The goals of the character's communication evolve significantly throughout the film. Early interactions are transactional or ego-driven—aimed at defending his status, making demands, or asserting dominance. His language often serves to entertain or provoke, rather than to connect. For instance, in initial scenes, he uses vulgarity and sarcasm as default modes of interaction. However, exposure to different social norms and Dr. Shirley's influence gradually reshape his communicative objectives. He begins to speak with purpose: to protect, to express appreciation, to defend others, or to negotiate fairness in hostile environments. One pivotal transformation is evident in his defense of Shirley at the southern mansion, where his words challenge racial discrimination. By the end of the film, his language reflects emotional maturity—demonstrating empathy, humility, and sincerity in both private and public exchanges. His communicative ends shift from asserting control to fostering connection. Tony's communicative goals transition from self-serving to socially engaged. Early in the film, the job interview scene (00:16:47) shows him responding to structured formality with blunt speech. Shirley's professionalism forces Tony to engage differently, setting the stage for future adaptation. Later, in the letter-writing scene (01:08:33), Shirley encourages Tony to express himself: "Tell me what you're trying to say." This interaction demonstrates how communicative goals shift from functional to emotional. At a Southern mansion (01:42:16), Tony defends Shirley's right to use the restroom: "Either I eat in this room, or I'm not performing tonight." This act—linguistically framed as a demand—demonstrates Tony's evolved use of assertive speech to support others. The excerpt aligns with Putra [6], who showed how ethical values are transmitted through character dialogue.

Another crucial scene is the rain conversation (01:36:05), where Tony advises Shirley: "The world's full of lonely people afraid to make the first move." This instance shows Tony's transition into



empathetic speech, echoing the emotional nuance discussed in the E-SPEAKING model by Pishghadam [11]. Finally, in the Christmas dinner scene (02:02:16), Shirley is welcomed into Tony's home. Dolores' statement signifies the culmination of communicative transformation, reflecting Sari's [5] emphasis on evolving communicative norms in familiar versus formal settings. These shifts across setting, participants, and ends support the conclusion that communication is a dynamic cultural act, continuously shaped by context, relationships, and purpose. The findings reaffirm Hymes' framework as a powerful tool for analyzing linguistic behavior in mediated cultural texts and align with broader themes found in the existing ethnographic studies.

#### IV. Conclusion

This study examines communicative behavior and how it changes within specific cultural and social contexts. Using the ethnography of communication framework—particularly the elements of setting, participants, and communicative ends—the study reveals a significant shift in the speaker's language use, from informal and culturally insensitive expressions to more polite, empathetic, and contextually appropriate communication. These changes indicate a growing cultural awareness and communicative ability affected by changing interpersonal connections and social contexts. This study's communicative events and speech acts were explored ethnographically to reveal how language interacts within cultural and social contexts. This analysis reveals that language use is influenced by a number of factors, including social roles, environmental settings, and the speaker's relationship dynamics with others. These findings emphasize the relationship between linguistic behavior and cultural understanding, demonstrating how communication evolves in response to power structures, emotional contexts, and changing cultural awareness. As a result, the study emphasizes that communication is more than just a functional tool; it is also a dynamic process of identity negotiation, cross-cultural sensitivity, and personal growth.

While this study provides valuable insight into the communicative transformation of a single character through three components of the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model, it is limited in scope by focusing exclusively on one speaker and excluding other communicative elements and character perspectives. Future research could expand the analysis by including multiple characters or comparing communication patterns across different films to offer broader sociolinguistic interpretations. Additionally, applying all components of the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. framework may yield a more holistic understanding of how cinematic narratives portray linguistic and cultural interaction. By building on the foundations laid in this study, such research could contribute further to the development of media literacy and cross-cultural communication training, emphasizing how storytelling can shape awareness of identity, empathy, and coexistence.

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