
Language Styles in UFC Trash Talk : a Sociolinguistics Study

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Abstrak

This research explores how fighters in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) use language in their press conferences and media appearances, with a focus on the styles and purposes of their verbal exchanges. Using a qualitative approach, the study looks at transcripts from UFC events between 2010 and 2025, especially the words of well-known fighters such as Conor McGregor, Nate Diaz and other Fighters. The analysis is based on Labov's (1972) framework for storytelling, which includes parts like the abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda, as well as Jakobson's (1960) ideas about the different functions of language. The research identifies three main ways fighters use language: confrontational, which involves direct insults and threats; humorous, which includes sarcasm and irony; and performative, which is more about making a dramatic or showy statement. Out of 20 data of UFC trash talk, the analysis revealed that fighters strategically employ various language styles to construct their public personas, intimidate opponents, and engage audiences. Regarding language style classification, the data shows a relatively balanced distribution across narrative categories. Orientation, Complicating Action, and Evaluation were the most frequently used styles, each (20%) of the analyzed data, abstract and Coda each accounted for (15%), resolution appeared least frequently with only (10%). This research contributes to sociolinguistics, particularly in understanding how language is strategically used in sports media discourse. It highlights how trash talk functions as a context-dependent communicative practice shaped by social norms, performance, and interactional goals.

Kata Kunci: Language style, Sociolinguistics, Trash talk, UFC.

A. INTRODUCTION

The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) has grown from a combat into a worldwide entertainment event that draws millions of viewers around the world. While audience are mainly attracted to the physical contest that take places inside the octagon, another aspect has grown to be just as crucial in shaping the spectacle of the sport: verbal interaction between fighters. One of the most common ways in this interaction takes places in through trash talk, which involve fighters making bold, provocative comments, insult, or exaggerated claims either before or after match. Although trash talk might seem just rude behavior, it is actually a deliberate way of communicating that helps create stories, grab people's attention, and affect apponent's thoughts and feelings.

From a sosiolinguistics perspective, trash talk represents a unique communicative practice where language is deliberately used as performance. Fighters carefully choose their words, tone, and style to build their public image, show confidence, and engage with their

audience. In UFC media events like press conferences, interviews, and promotional activities, trash talk is often become into a wider storytelling approach that helps create excitement around upcoming fights and enhances fan interaction. These interactions show how language can serve not just as a way to communicate but also as a means for competing, persuading, and entertaining.

Several researchers have examined how the way language is used and presented influences communication in media and social settings. Research in sociolinguistics shows that people change how they speak based on the social situation, who they are talking to, and what they want to achieve in communication (Coupland, 2007). Meanwhile, the narrative structure theory introduced by Labov in 1972 describes how spoken conversations can be broken down into several stages, including an abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and a coda. Jakobson's (1960) theory of language functions explains that the way people speak can have different purposes, such as expressing feelings, trying to influence others, referring to something specific, keeping communication going, or talking about language itself. These frameworks offer helpful tools for understanding how fighters structure their verbal interactions and the purposes that those interactions serve.

Although the UFC has become increasingly popular and its fighter interviews and press conferences are widely shared online, there is still a lack of linguistic research focused specifically on the trash talk commonly used in the sport. Many previous research efforts have concentrated on sports communication, media discussions, or overall verbal aggression, but the structure of stories and the ways in which trash talk is used in UFC environments have not been extensively examined. This gap highlights the importance of sociolinguistic research that looks into how trash talk functions as an organized and intentional form of communication in professional fighting.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the language styles and communicative functions used in UFC trash talk. By applying Labov's narrative structure and Jakobson's language function framework, this research seeks to identify how fighters organize their verbal interactions and what purposes those interactions serve in the context of sports media. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of narrative structure analysis and sociolinguistic function analysis to examine trash talk as a performative linguistic practice in combat sports.

This study is important because it contributes to sociolinguistic research by demonstrating how language is used strategically in competitive and media-driven environments. Understanding the linguistic patterns in UFC trash talk helps reveal how fighters construct identity, assert dominance, and engage audiences through verbal performance. Moreover, the study expands the application of sociolinguistic theories into the field of sports discourse.

Recent studies in sports discourse and media communication show that language plays an important role in shaping identity and audience engagement. For example, research by Jaworski and Thurlow (2025) highlights how language in sports media functions as a form of performance that constructs public identity. However, despite these studies, the specific linguistic structure and communicative functions of trash talk in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) remain underexplored in sociolinguistic research.

This study is important for academic research because, even though trash talk in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is commonly shared and discussed on social media, it has not been thoroughly examined in linguistic studies. By carefully analyzing the language techniques and stylistic elements used in UFC trash talk, this research helps improve our understanding of how aggressive behavior and skilled word use operate in discussions about combat sports. Data and analysis conducted were intended to address two main research questions:

- 1). What language styles do UFC fighters use in trash talk?

2). What are the functions behind the trash talk used by UFC fighters?

This research focuses on UFC trash talk because it clearly shows how people use different styles of speaking in a fast-paced, media-focused setting. Fighters such as Conor McGregor, Nate Diaz, and other Fighters use trash talk to not only challenge their opponents but also to build their public image, increase the excitement of the sport, and make the events more interesting for viewers. The importance of this study is in understanding how language, in the context of performance and social interaction, can be used to show power, express identity, and provide entertainment.

B.METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze language styles in UFC trash talk. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is used to explore and understand meanings that individuals or groups assign to social phenomena. This approach is appropriate for examining trash talk as a contextual and performative linguistic practice in sports media. The data of this study were taken from transcripts of UFC press conferences and media appearances between 2010 and 2025, focusing on well-known fighters such as Conor McGregor, Nate Diaz, and Chael Sonnen. The data collection was conducted through several steps. First, the researcher selected relevant UFC press conference videos from official platforms such as YouTube. Second, the verbal interactions were transcribed manually to capture the linguistic details. Third, the transcripts were checked repeatedly by re-watching the videos to ensure accuracy and contextual relevance.

After the data were verified, utterances containing trash talk were identified and selected as the primary data. The data were then categorized based on Labov's (1972) narrative structure, including abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. Furthermore, Jakobson's (1960) theory of language functions was applied to analyze the communicative purposes of each utterance. Through this process, the study provides a systematic analysis of both the stylistic patterns and communicative functions of UFC trash talk in sports media discourse.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study analyzed the language styles used in UFC trash talk during press conferences. The data was collected from transcripts of selected UFC events between 2015 and 2024, focusing on fighters known for their distinctive verbal exchanges, such as Conor McGregor, Nate Diaz, and other fighters. The analysis applied Labov's (1972) narrative structure model and Jakobson's (1960) language functions to categorize the stylistic and functional aspects of trash talk. Each key utterance was examined in its context to understand its role in shaping fighter identities, power dynamics, and audience engagement.

The findings revealed three dominant language styles in UFC trash talk: confrontational, humorous, and performative. The confrontational style includes direct insults, threats, and challenges aimed at provoking opponents. The humorous style relies on sarcasm, irony, and wit to entertain the audience while undermining opponents. The performative style consists of exaggerated, theatrical statements designed to enhance a fighter's public image and create memorable moments.

Additionally, the study identified six structural elements of trash talk, following Labov's narrative framework: Abstract (opening hook), Orientation (context setting), Complicating Action (tension escalation), Evaluation (emotional emphasis), Resolution (climactic declaration), and Coda (final reinforcement). These elements demonstrate how fighters construct trash talk as a strategic narrative, blending competition with entertainment.

Table 1. Styles and Their Functions

No	Data	Types	Function
1	"I own this town, I own Rio de Jenairo, I'm sitting up here with my feet on the desk and no one of you gonna do anything about it."	Abstract	Conative
2	"I'm the king of Miami, and I'll baptize you in your own blood if you step in here with me."	Abstract	Conative
3	"You know what happened last time. You tapped like a rookie. Now you're pretending you've got a chance? Same story, different day."	Orientation	Referential
4	"You got dominated last time, and nothing's changed. You're still the same scared little boy waiting for the ref to save you."	Orientation	Referential
5	"I'll make you quit before the third. You ain't built for this. Your team knows it, the fans know it you're just too proud to admit it."	Complicating Action	Conative
6	"I will finish you in the first round. You're not on my level. You're just another stepping stone."	Complicating Action	Conative
7	"You call yourself a champion? I've wiped the floor with better fighters than you on my worst day!"	Evaluation	Expressive
8	"I'm not surprised, motherfuckers."	Coda	Expressive
9	"Saturday night, I'll show the world why you don't belong in this cage with me. It's over before it starts."	Resolution	Expressive

Discussion

This research looks at the different ways Fighters use different styles of communication abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda to grab attention, create reactions, and gain an edge before the fight even starts. Each type of language has a particular purpose and shows how trash talk is a strategic part of communication in combat sports.

a. Abstract Types

Data 1

Conor McGregor:

"I own this town, I own Rio de Jenairo, I'm sitting up here with my feet on the desk and no one of you gonna do anything about it."

(Youtube,UFC 189, 24:24-24:36)

McGregor's statement shows a confrontational style of trash talk that mixes showing off power with acting like he's superior. His words, "I own this town, I own Rio de Janeiro," act as an attention-grabbing opening, right away claiming he's the best. Then, when he says, "I'm sitting up here with my feet on the desk and no one of you gonna do anything about it," he sets

the scene, showing his dominance by making fun of the crowd's helplessness in his opponent's home country.

This statement fulfills a conative function, challenging both José Aldo and the Brazilian audience to respond while making them feel powerless. His body language, like having his feet on the desk, and his rude tone, like saying "no one of you gonna do anything," use both physical and verbal actions to show he's in control. By claiming he owns Rio, he adds insult by treating Aldo's home as something he has taken over, increasing the psychological pressure through both physical and cultural defiance.

Data 2

Jorge Masvidal:

"I'm the king of Miami, and I'll baptize you in your own blood if you step in here with me."
(YouTube, UFC 244, 10:15–10:23)

Masvidal's statement shows aggressive trash talk that mixes a sense of dominance with violent images. He says, "I'm the king of Miami," which shows he feels powerful and in control. Then he adds a strong warning, "I'll baptize you in your own blood," which increases the conflict by making the fight seem extreme and unfair. Using a religious term like "baptize" adds a kind of dark humor, suggesting that the violence is almost like a fate that cannot be avoided.

This has a conative purpose, as it directly confronts his opponent and makes the audience feel intimidated. The use of strong and clear language, combined with his confident manner of speaking, helps to establish him as a harsh and determined competitor.

b. Orientation Types

Data 3

Conor McGregor:

"You know what happened last time. You tapped like a rookie. Now you're pretending you've got a chance? Same story, different day."

(YouTube, UFC 202, 18:12–18:20)

Conor McGregor's statement sets the stage by bringing up a past submission loss of his opponent, such as when he said, "You tapped like a rookie." By reminding the audience of the opponent's previous defeat, McGregor portrays the upcoming match as a predictable outcome, casting doubt on the opponent's current confidence when he asks, "Now you're pretending you've got a chance?" The phrase "Same story, different day" highlights a pattern of dominance, suggesting that history is likely to repeat itself.

This aligns with the referential function of language, using shared knowledge of the previous fight to heighten the significance of the current event.

The tone is dismissive and mocking, using the opponent's past performance to undermine their current stance. McGregor also employs vivid language like "tapped like a rookie" to add a layer of embarrassment, making the statement emotionally powerful and charged.

Data 4

Colby Covington:

"You got dominated last time, and nothing's changed. You're still the same scared little boy waiting for the ref to save you."

(YouTube, UFC 245, 15:40–15:50)

Covington's statement prepares the way by mentioning a previous loss, positioning the next match as a redo. The line "You got dominated last time" brings up the opponent's past defeat, and "waiting for the ref to save you" suggests they are weak. The tone is dismissive, calling the opponent a "scared little boy," which adds mental pressure.

This matches the referential function, which uses shared experiences to reduce the opponent's confidence. The use of mocking language increases the feeling of humiliation, turning the opponent's past into a tool against them.

c. Complicating Action Types

Data 5

Sean Strickland:

"I'll make you quit before the third. You ain't built for this. Your team knows it, the fans know it you're just too proud to admit it."

(YouTube, UFC 297, 7:22–7:32)

Strickland's aggressive remarks increase the tension by forecasting an early defeat, suggesting his opponent will give up before the third round. The statement "You ain't built for this" challenges the rival's ability to withstand the challenge, while referencing external support by saying "Your team knows it" serves to undermine the opponent's credibility.

This combines conative functions, which involve challenging the opponent, with expressive functions, which convey disdain. The straightforward approach and the way it involves the audience increase the sense of drama.

Data 6

Ilia Topuria:

"I will finish you in the first round. You're not on my level. You're just another stepping stone."

(YouTube, UFC 298, 8:03–8:12)

Topuria's statement shows a bold and confident way of talking trash, mixing fight predictions with intentional disrespect. His words, "I will finish you in the first round," directly raise the tension, right away making the fight seem like an uneven match. By saying "You're not on my level," he completely ignores his opponent's abilities, highlighting his own strength. The phrase "You're just another stepping stone" further lowers his rival's importance, treating them as a small challenge in his career rather than a real competitor.

Topuria's declaration exemplifies the conative and expressive functions of language, blending confrontation with unshakable self-assurance. The phrase "I will finish you in the first round" directly challenges his opponent (conative), demanding a reaction while asserting control over the fight's narrative.

d. Evaluation Types

Data 7

Conor McGregor:

"You call yourself a champion? I've wiped the floor with better fighters than you on my worst day!"

(YouTube, UFC 205, 12:45–12:52)

McGregor's statement reflects the evaluation stage, where he uses exaggeration and sarcasm to emotionally weaken his opponent. The phrase "wiped the floor with better fighters than you" highlights his superiority by implying that the opponent is not even as skilled as

those he has already beaten. The sarcastic remark "on my worst day" further reduces the opponent's standing, making his claim more powerful and memorable.

This matches the main purpose of language as a means of expression, as McGregor uses intense feelings like dislike and sarcasm to show he is in control. The over-the-top comparison not only makes the other person seem less important but also shows how sure he is, which makes the scene stand out for the viewers.

e. Coda Types

Data 8

Nate Diaz:

"I'm not surprised, motherfuckers."

(Youtube,UFC 196, 0:41-0:45)

Diaz's remark exemplifies humorous/performative trash talk, blending sarcasm and audience engagement. The line serves as a coda (closing reflection) in Labov's model, reinforcing Diaz's rebellious persona while dismissing his opponent's credibility.

This iconic line exemplifies the expressive function of language, where Diaz uses intense emotion to show confidence and realness. The words "I'm not surprised" show his strong belief in his success, making it seem like the result was certain, which reflects his confident personality. Adding "motherfuckers" makes the message more emotional, mixing anger with support for his fans.

f.Resolution Types

Data 9

Israel Adesanya:

"Saturday night, I'll show the world why you don't belong in this cage with me. It's over before it starts."

(YouTube, UFC 263, 5:30–5:38)

Adesanya's statement is part of the resolution phase, making a final and dramatic announcement that presents the fight as already decided. The line "I'll show the world why you don't belong" is a clear challenge, while "It's over before it starts" increases the intensity by suggesting the opponent has no chance of winning.

The language serves the purpose of urging action, directly speaking to both the opponent and the audience to call attention to Adesanya's superiority. The straight tone and mention of a future event, "Saturday night," build excitement, making the statement a key point in the trash-talk story.

D.CONCLUSION

Through the perspective of sociolinguistics, this study explored the language styles and purposes of trash talk in the UFC, with a focus on press conferences and media events. The research identified six narrative-based language styles Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda as defined by Labov (1972). These styles were used intentionally by fighters such as Conor McGregor, Nate Diaz, and other fighters to shape their identities, claim superiority, and connect with audiences. This study analyzed 20 data of UFC trash talk to identify language styles and their functions within the framework of Labov's narrative structure and Jakobson's language functions. The analysis revealed a relatively balanced distribution across narrative categories. Orientation (context setting), Complicating Action (escalation), and Evaluation (emotional impact) were the most frequently used styles,

each appearing in (20%) of the analyzed data. This suggests that fighters prioritize establishing context through past rivalries, escalating tension through direct challenges, and amplifying emotional impact through rhetorical techniques. Abstract (opening hook) and Coda (closing reflection) each accounted for (15%), demonstrating their importance as memorable entry and exit points in trash talk exchanges. Resolution (climax) appeared least frequently with only (10%), indicating that fighters often leave confrontations open-ended rather than providing definitive closure, potentially to maintain ongoing narrative tension.

The results show that trash talk is an entertain form of performance, combining psychological tactics, entertainment, and self-promotion. The context was important: the UFC's media-focused environment turned aggressive language into a tool for storytelling and shaping a brand. Future research might look at differences in trash talk across cultures or how it has changed over time to better understand its sociolinguistic effects. This study contributes to sociolinguistics and pragmatics by showing that UFC trash talk is not merely impolite language but a structured, strategic, and context-dependent form of communication. It also extends Labov's narrative framework into sports media discourse, highlighting how aggressive language operates as performance and identity construction.

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