Discursive Practices, Linguistic Repertoire, and Racial Identities

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1 Introduction

“Discursive practices” correspond to the ways in which people throughout the world use a combination of language and symbols in expressive and communicative ways. Discursive practices vary from culture to culture, and frequently differ within a speech community depending upon the groups of people who may share knowledge of a common language. Their means of expression and interpretation may be dissimilar, however, due to factors that lead to the relative isolation of groups within a speech community based, say, on region, religion, sexual orientation, or race – among others. Here we focus on the ways in which discursive practices intersect with racial identities, along with descriptions of why different linguistic repertoires can either enhance or restrain the ways in which racial identities are affirmed overtly through language usage.

A discussion of this kind could easily fall prey to the misleading implication of linguistic supremacy, that is, in the sense that discursive practices are dominated by language usage, which is why our discussion begins with a powerful illustration of nonverbal discursive practice with overt racial symbolism. During the 1968 Olympics two African American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, won gold and bronze medals respectively in the men's 200 meter race. Australian Peter Norman took second place in the event, sharing the winner's podium with the two African American athletes.

Tommie Smith (2007) would later write about this iconic and controversial victory celebration in his autobiography, Silent Gesture. The relevance of that episode to the present discussion is due in large measure to the fact that the raised fists of the African American athletes, who wore black gloves and removed their shoes to symbolize black poverty in their homeland, did not employ language; however, they did engage in a symbolic discursive practice that was highly communicative. Indeed, all three athletes wore human rights badges on their jackets. Peter Norman did so in solidarity with the American black athletes, while simultaneously conveying his own disagreement with the mistreatment of Aboriginal people in his native Australia.

These symbolic gestures raised huge objections at the time: Tommie Smith and John Carlos were banished from the Olympic Village and were subject to death threats upon their return to the United States. No words were necessary to communicate their racial identity and solidarity with impoverished African Americans, who took pride in their accomplishment and the
courageous defiance that they displayed to a global audience that was forcibly reminded of the discriminatory plight of many black people in the United States.

Tommie Smith was reacting, at least in part, to the legacy of discrimination against African Americans, which was frequently on vivid historical display by the Ku Klux Klan, whose practices of burning crosses while wearing their iconic white robes and pointed hoods were symbolic nonverbal discursive practices designed to invoke black racial fear and to assert white supremacy. These symbolic nonlinguistic images were, of course, accompanied by racist linguistic discursive practices including hateful speeches and racist publications that utilized language to promote white supremacy overtly.

There are several reasons why this discussion emphasizes at the outset symbolic racial representations of discursive practices: the vast majority of discursive practices employ linguistic behavior in one way or another and the role of nonverbal symbols might easily be subsumed when compared with racial identities that are affirmed through linguistic content.

Figure 14.1 1968 Olympic Games, Mexico City, Mexico, men’s 200 meters final. US gold medallist Tommie Smith (center) and bronze medallist John Carlos give the black power salutes as an anti-racism protest as they stand on the podium with Australian silver medallist Peter Norman. (Credit: Rolls Press/Popperfoto/Getty Images)
“Linguistic repertoire” corresponds not only to representations of communicative competence and linguistic competence; individuals have differential access to the languages and dialects that thrive in their midst. Bilingual speakers, for example, may express racial identities quite differently, depending upon the language they employ. Latinos in the United States who are fluent in Spanish and English may reserve depictions of “La Raza” (i.e. the race) for Spanish usage, while rarely doing so in English. Bidialectal African Americans may employ vernacular black dialect to evoke racial solidarity, while rarely doing so with mainstream Standard American English.

Depictions and descriptions of racial identity vary greatly among people from different racial backgrounds throughout the world, where matters of racial identity tend to be strongly pronounced by those who either experience or acknowledge the existence of racial oppression, and it is often free from consideration by those who believe that racial discrimination is a relic of the past that has been replaced by circumstances where – in their opinion – racial differences no longer account for social disparities that may have existed in bygone times.

2 Relevant Research Perspectives

Evaluations of discursive practices are not the province of any one particular research discipline. Scholars in many fields have explored the ways in which people are expressive, and while the current remarks emphasize anthropological perspectives, where cultural considerations related to discursive practice are paramount, it is important to recognize that research in the humanities and social sciences frequently evaluates discursive practices through their respective disciplinary lenses. Educational researchers have also contributed substantially to our understanding of discursive practices in schools (see Young 2009). Philosophers who have formulated studies of speech acts are among the leading scholars devoted to specialized forms of discourse, where
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utterances have consequences, particularly when stated by those in positions of authority (see Austin 1962, Grice 1989, Searle 1969).

Walter Ong and some who have been inspired by his studies of the transition from orality (i.e. speech) to literacy (i.e. the acquisition of reading and writing) have also evaluated discursive behavior in academic and social settings (see Ong 1982, Farrell 1983, Tannen 1990). Heath (1983) links all three of these traditions in her studies of language usage in the American South among blacks and whites, observing a combination of cultural differences as well as educational disparities that have a direct impact on discursive practices in the communities and schools she studied. The communities that Heath evaluated, called Roadville and Trackton, are not merely segregated on the basis of race, but also by differences in discursive linguistic practices that reflect cultural dissimilarities in the ways that speech and literacy are employed, as well as how they are transmitted to the children who live in racial isolation, but who attend the same schools.

Both groups, the whites who live in Roadville, and the blacks who live in Trackton, are working class folks, but the ways in which they tell stories and use combinations of figurative and literal language owe much to the fact that Roadville residents trace their ancestry to the hills of Appalachia, where literal storytelling and rote memorization are valued, whereas Trackton residents are the descendants of field slaves who were historically denied access to schools and literacy, and they relied heavily on oral traditions that were often embellished to enhance their content and meaningful expression. Heath rightly resists dichotomous racial categorization in favor of complex cultural differences that owe their existence to historical segregation and differential access to the written word.

Sociolinguists and dialectologists have routinely studied language usage in a variety of social contexts and different regions by speakers from diverse backgrounds, sometimes working with monolingual speakers (see Labov 1966, Rickford and Rickford 2000, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998) and on other occasions evaluating the speech of speakers who employ more than one language (see Myers-Scotton 1993, Poplack 1979, Valdés 1996, and Zentella 1997).

A combination of sociologists and anthropologists have studied “talk” through conversation analyses that often utilize evaluations of video or audio recordings of day-to-day interactions among people in various social settings (see Goffman 1972, Sachs, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974, Goodwin 1981). Similarly, broader studies of discourse analyses that include and occasionally exceed conversation have been evaluated by scholars whose training incorporates aspects of sociology, anthropology, and linguistics (see Schiffrin 1988, Tannen 1990, Buchholz and Hall 2005).

Critical discourse analysts have been quite explicit about the consequences of speech and writing that have social and political relevance (see Wodak 2001, Fairclough 1989). Some have addressed the content of racist discourse directly, noting the divisive nature of remarks that serve to elevate some racial groups while disparaging others (see Van Dijk 1992, Kochman 1983). Whereas some linguists and anthropologists have evaluated language usage in a variety of social settings, proponents of critical discourse analyses (CDA) recognize that social and economic disparities within a given speech community have direct impact on human interaction and dialogue. CDA scholarship often evaluates power dynamics that are evident through linguistic characterization, and studies of gender inequality are illustrative in this regard. Women in many different speech communities do not have the same opportunities as men, and often this lack of opportunity is embodied in discursive practices that employ language as a means of maintaining discriminatory practices. For example, some employers deny opportunities to younger women based on the belief that they may need maternity leave, which may or may not be stated explicitly. The United States military, until very recently, excluded woman from combat roles based on assumptions that their male colleagues would be in greater danger derived from their (i.e. the men’s) desire to be more protective of women serving in combat.
CDA also evaluates other power dynamics that are displayed through language, such as when a police officer gives commands, or bosses admonish their workers. The language usage of racists has also been the object of scholarly inquiry using CDA, because many racist texts or comments tend to demonize the group that is the object of scorn, while praising the group(s) that often convey racially insensitive or hurtful comments.

Language educators, including those who teach English, writing, and foreign languages have long been devoted to helping students expand their discursive linguistic capacities in academic contexts from pre-schoolers to graduate students in higher education. Some of these studies, from different disciplinary perspectives, evaluate how language operates in workplaces, as well as gathering perceptions of the languages and dialects that people encounter within the speech communities where they live (see Preston 1989, Purnell, Idsardi and Baugh 1999).

Some scholars devote primary attention to the teaching and acquisition of reading in first or second languages, and these analyses also provide insights into a realm of discursive practice that is related to the ways in which people can encode the written word (see Bernhardt 1992, Brantmeier 2009). Students of semiotics have also grappled with the ways in which language and other forms of symbolic representations correspond to human communicative capacities (see Sebeok 2001). In addition, the field of the “sociology of language” represents a specialized branch of sociology where language serves as the primary means through which social demarcation within communities is identified (see Fishman 1972, Bernstein 1971).

These observations about diverse research that is devoted to alternative forms of discursive practices are by no means comprehensive; rather, they are representative of an array of studies that explore the full range of human communicative expression, spanning purely introspective linguistic analyses such as those proposed by Chomsky (1957, 1965) as well as the ethnographic perspectives espoused by Hymes (1964, 1972) and Hymes and Gumperz (1972).

On some occasions these studies explicitly evaluate racial identities, and some speech pathologists have been explicit in this regard, seeking to differentiate pathological speech disorders from vernacular dialects employed by members of minority groups (see Seymour and Seymour 1997, Washington and Craig 1999, Wyatt 1997, Stockman 2006, Vaughn-Cook 1976, Peña 2007).

In addition to the studies cited thus far, which tend to be grounded in different academic disciplines, there are many scholars who have described discursive practices in their own right. Most of these evaluations consider the ways in which discursive practices operate in different social circumstances, including schools (see Lemon 1995, 2002, Young 2009, Stoughton and Siverston 2005), and regarding social identity (Wilson 1999). Unlike many of the disciplinary oriented studies of human communicative endeavors, explicit studies of discursive practices share evaluations of expressive ways in which people affirm group affiliations or other forms of categorization or classification.

As indicated, no one discipline can claim to provide a comprehensive approach to studies of discursive practices, and those who strive to produce new studies of discursive behaviors will need to take care in designing their research, taking into account the theoretical assumptions that are inherent in the corresponding analytical methods that are employed, as well as the means and circumstances through which corresponding data are gathered. Anyone who attempts to evaluate discursive practices will no doubt find their task to be somewhat daunting, but the vast majority of scholars cited thus far are careful to identify their research domain with empirical evidence that justifies their alternative modes of analysis.

3 Historical Perspectives

In order to understand the history of racial identities it is first important to acknowledge the ways in which humans have come to classify themselves and others in both biological and
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sociological terms. Depending upon the nation and communities in question, matters of racial diversity, disparities, and identity will vary substantially, as will relationships among those who are members of different racial groups. Biologists are quick to point out that racial differences among humans are quite minor, in terms of skin color, hair texture, and other physical traits that are associated with people of different racial backgrounds. Sociologists, on the other hand, and historians frequently observe that human behavior is often determined by race, resulting in privilege for some and hardship for others.

The matter of membership within racial groups is also relevant, depending upon someone’s personal racial identity, as well as the ways in which racial classifications are constructed by those who are not members of that particular racial group. That is, some people are “insiders” to a specific racial group, while others are “outsiders” to that race. A current controversy in the United States is highly emblematic of this situation. More specifically, the Washington, D.C. professional football team is called “The Redskins,” which is a racist term that was used historically in disparaging ways to refer to Native Americans from any Indian nation; Cherokee, Cree, Arapaho, Navajo, Apache, and Cheyenne (among others) were lumped together under the “Redskin” label. American Indians (i.e. insiders) never referred to themselves in this manner: it was only non-Indians (i.e. outsiders) who adopted this terminology. The current owner of “The Washington Redskins” has resisted calls to change the name of the team, citing tradition; however, the historical discursive practice that referred to Native Americans as “Redskins” is unquestionably racist and remains offensive to American Indians, and others who find the term to be objectionable.

There is a degree of racial relativity that comes into play in this regard, to say little of the fact that many people today claim mixed racial heritage, which began along with the historical colonization and conquests previously described, and racially mixed children continue to be born in different parts of the world. In some cases, like my own, racial mixing was forced upon enslaved women who were denied the dignity of choosing the men who impregnated them. It is now far more common for children with biracial or multiracial backgrounds to be the product of loving, mutually supportive unions. Regardless of the positive or negative circumstances that gave rise to racially mixed populations, many people who are the product of racial mixing often employ their own discursive practices to affirm their multiracial heritage.

It is also important to note that a great many of these historical episodes transpired long before the industrial revolution. Wind provided the power for sailing vessels at that time, and guns capable of firing a single shot before reloading played a huge role in the conquest of populations that did not possess firearms. With the advent of the industrial revolution, circumstances began to change regarding the speed with which people could travel, and the creation of new guns capable of firing multiple shots before reloading added greatly to the power of those, typically white people who had ready access to those highly sophisticated weapons.

These were the evolutionary circumstances that gave rise not only to in-group and out-group racial identities; they frequently defined lines of social demarcation that were easily maintained in societies where racial differences came to define one’s social and political standing, to say little of corresponding access to education for oneself or one’s children. Although linguists and anthropologists know well that all living cultures support spoken languages, writing systems are not equally universal. Moreover, the communities where written forms of languages exist are further stratified by those who have learned to read and write, in contrast to those who have been unable to acquire literacy.

Access to education has, throughout the world, much more to do with economic circumstances than racial heritage per se. Nevertheless, in the communities that have historically (or currently) exhibited racial discrimination, the subordinate racial group(s) tend to be poor and
therefore lack access to adequate educational opportunities. Those who do not have the ability to read and write usually rely on oral traditions to communicate. At times these oral events are highly ritualized, where storytelling and poetry are engaged for various reasons, similar to those previously described related to studies by Heath (1983). In some instances these oral traditions intersect with spoken discourse related to racial identities, but language devoted to matters of race in cultures without written forms of language are fleeting by nature since speech, unless recorded, vanishes at the moment it is produced.

Those who have access to literacy also have the means by which they can record discourse for posterity, and the existence of written records has been a distinctive hallmark of human evolution for those languages that have come to include viable writing systems that convert speech to a visual format. Speech is universal to every human society, while writing is limited to those who gain access to education in cultures that practice literacy. Human discourse, in the form of either speech or writing, is the vehicle through which discursive practices embracing racial identities are typically conveyed. As noted at the outset, many symbolic forms of racial identity exceed language usage, but the vast majority of discursive episodes that reflect racial matters are contained in utterances or writing.

Discursive practices that evoke racial symbolism and identity have varied greatly throughout human history, and they remain as evidence of instances of racial division or solidarity in different communities throughout the world. Immigration patterns have, in some cases, exacerbated these trends as newcomers to a nation who may be of a different racial background than the majority of native citizens can often become the object of racial scorn, particularly in circumstances where economic pressures are such that they are perceived to threaten occupational opportunities for local native groups. History has also revealed some remarkable people, such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, who have employed discursive practices to combat racism, elitism, and the injustices born of racial subjugation. India, South Africa, and the United States were all once ruled by British monarchs, and their soldiers governed with brutality against local populations. The legacy of racial oppression still lingers in India, South Africa, and the United States; however, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela utilized a combination of inspirational speeches as well as acts of political defiance to promote racial equality in their respective countries. Again, we find that discursive practices are not the product of linguistic behavior alone; rather, it is the combination of symbolic activities, which frequently include inspirational language, that complements other events to achieve justice and racial liberation.

4 Analytical Procedures

Scholars who seek to examine discursive practices associated with racial identity have many options, depending upon the era and evidence to be considered to evaluate these communicative or symbolic events. Those who wish to study historical examples of racial identity are frequently at the mercy of differential records in this regard. Since “time travel” is not possible, archaeologists and anthropologists do their very best to reconstruct the lives and cultures of people from bygone days, based on the array of artefacts they leave behind, which offer the keys and clues to reconstructing the lives of past cultures. Tools, pottery, and clothing are common evidence for these purposes, but the discovery of the “Rosetta Stone” hints at the rarity with which written records are recovered; even rarer is the appearance of an ancient tome that makes explicit or indirect references to race.

Those who wish to study discursive activities regarding racial identities after the advent of the printing press have the advantage of access to superior documentation; many of these books or records contain specific racial information. For example, the sale of African slaves in North
and South America was frequently accompanied by documents regarding the purchase price of the slaves, along with descriptions of their sex, age, language abilities, and other characteristics such as mixed racial heritage. Those interested in these events within the United States have the added advantage of recordings that were gathered by John and Alan Lomax; their field recordings are now available on-line, and they contain a wealth of oral history by Americans from different racial backgrounds, including black prisoners who would sing while working on Mississippi chain gangs.

Any effort to reconstruct the nature of discursive practices related to racial identities in historical terms will be more or less challenging, depending upon the communities of interest and the quality of the records available. In the modern era a host of new procedures can be employed to study discursive practices that correspond to racial identities, including experiments, surveys, and participant observation. Social psychologists have already conducted experiments with significant racial salience, including Steele’s (1999) formulation of “stereotype threat,” which is manifest as a result of racial preconceptions.

Educators, political scientists, and sociologists have all explored racial behavior and classifications, using a variety of analytical procedures that are tailored to their specific research interests and goals. Educators have been fixated on differences in academic performance based on race (see Banks 2002, Ladson-Billings 1994, Darling-Hammond 2004). Political scientists have concentrated on political engagement by different racial groups at different points in history (see Dawson 2011, Cohen 2010, Barker 1994, Fraga 1995). Sociologists, such as Myrdal (1944), Moynihan (1965) and Wilson (1978, 1996) have also evaluated racial characteristics related to employment, welfare, and a myriad of social traits such as crime, drug use, and symbolic racism (see Sears 1988, Bobo 1983, 2012). When viewed collectively each branch of social science has embraced alternative forms of discursive practices with racial salience, and those who wish to study these practices as they exist today can utilize an array of methodologies that can shed light on different dimensions of racial identities for various populations throughout the world.

Surveys may be useful in some circumstances, and some may be well suited to utilizing the internet in ways that were simply unavailable several years ago. Experimental studies of racial identity are also possible, where matters of racial membership and identity can be evaluated through controlled studies among people from different backgrounds. Anthropologists may wish to observe these practices, which might include careful recordings of accounts pertaining to racial identities. Alexander (2010) has employed some of these methods in her book on the excessively high rates of African American incarceration. Santa Ana (2002) has evaluated portrayals of Latinos in print media, along with some unflattering metaphors that have been used to depict people of Mexican ancestry. Indeed, the title of Santa Ana’s (2002) book, Brown tide rising, is a phrase that he discovered in a news story about the growing Latino population in the United States, that is, including both documented and undocumented residents. His work describes other metaphorical depictions of “wetbacks” and “beaners” that are demeaning to people of Latino descent.

Alexander (2010), who is an attorney by training, was able to look at a range of legal evidence in support of her research. Santa Ana (2002) used discourse analyses to gather the metaphorical comparisons that he found in print media. Anthropologists and ethnographers may also find it useful to employ “Conversation Analysis” to examine discursive practices regarding racial identities, which might be done directly or indirectly (Goodwin 1990). The “direct” approach, which may be better suited to studies where the analyst is already familiar with racial terminology and nomenclature, might include interviews or recordings of conversations where racial topics are explicit. Such interviews could address racial labels and classifications directly, or field recordings could minimize the participation of the observer in
favor of recording local citizens who are engaged in discussion about racial identities amongst themselves. Indirect evaluation might take the form of ethnographic interviews or inquiries where the analyst does not introduce any racial classifications in an a priori manner, but rather crafts a series of questions related to the ways in which people in a given community refer to themselves. Thus, in the case of ethnographic inquiries, the fieldworker will not ask about specific racial labels in an explicit manner, but will approach the topic by making inquiries about different groups in a community, while hoping to elicit the corresponding racial labels that are employed.

The internet also offers new and alternative means of exploring racial identity because “YouTube” and “Twitter”, among other social media, are often explicit in their racial portrayals and characterizations. In these cases the anthropologist could take advantage of new advances in technology that, under ideal circumstances, might serve as a supplement to traditional fieldwork where a combination of (in)direct data collection procedures are utilized.

5 Anticipated Findings

Just as there are many languages that differ throughout the world, we also know that they possess linguistic universals in order to operate effectively for human communication (see Chomsky 1957, 1965). Similarly, the discursive practices that embody racial identities will have diverse manifestations in different cultures at different points in time. When matters of racial identity are concerned, however, discursive practices will always contain direct or indirect racial characterizations, or some combination thereof.

Depending upon the community and the symbolic representation(s) for racial identity, the analyst of corresponding discursive practices may expect to locate evidence in speech, writing, and visual representations, such as paintings (from long ago) or internet video recordings (which utilize more recent advanced technology).

Historical accounts of racial identities will be tied, in all likelihood, to the corresponding technology from the era when these depictions were created. Cave dwellers who left drawings of their livelihoods on the walls of their cavern homes did so to the best of their abilities, occasionally depicting wars with antagonists whose group affiliations differed from theirs. Paintings that represent the crusades often take on symbolic, if not explicit, racial representations that are occasionally supported by written records with racial significance. Hitler’s rise to power in the wake of World War I and the terrible atrocities that he inflicted on Jewish (and other) victims of the Holocaust reflect Nazi propaganda, the complex mixture of speech, writing, and visual symbolism that was intended to bolster the “master race.”

South Africa’s apartheid policies have been somewhat transformative in this regard, drawing upon historical practices to distinguish between white, colored, and black populations, along with the corresponding advantages or disadvantages derived from these racial classifications. To illustrate this legacy the creators of the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg provide all visitors with tickets that randomly assign guests to one of the three apartheid era racial groups. Thus, upon purchasing a ticket, the visitor is randomly designated to enter the museum through one of three entrances; that is, for whites, for coloured people, or for blacks. The entrances are separated by see-through barriers that allow each visitor to witness, at a distance, the alternative experiences of other visitors whose museum admission classifications differ from their own. As such, the curators of this museum remind all who enter that South Africa was once overtly divided by race, so much so that authorities resorted to “a pencil test” to assist them with their racial classification. Briefly, a pencil would be inserted into a person’s hair – male or female – and, depending on whether the pencil fell from the hair, they were then classified as being
white, colored, or black, along with other considerations, such as skin color. Whites, for the most part, were not able to place pencils in their hair without them falling out. Black people could insert a pencil into their hair and it would remain fixed. Anthropologists will recognize that this particular discursive practice need not require any linguistic accompaniment whatsoever, yet the relevance to racial identity is overt.

An illustration of another discursive practice that has racial significance and has taken on mythical stature resulted from Gandhi’s “Salt March” in 1930 to protest the British salt tax. Gandhi left his home in Ahmedabad and within 24 days he walked nearly 240 miles to the Arabian Sea, whereupon he made salt in defiance of British law and its salt monopoly throughout India. This famous nonviolent act of civil disobedience was not explicit in its racial portrayals, but the racial relevance of this act is inescapable because Gandhi’s race and that of his fellow Indians differed from that of their British rulers.

Leaping forward to the present, the legacy of “Rap” and “Hip Hop,” which are no longer the exclusive province of African American spoken word artists, often describe circumstances with racial relevance, and the oral skills and carefully crafted dialog included in support of Hip Hop worldwide often embraces a defiant tone in opposition to authorities that are viewed as oppressive (Alim 2006, Morgan 2009). While youthful resistance to authority is not limited to racial contexts, the spoken word traditions evolved in African American communities that have given rise to the global Hip Hop nation stem from the racial oppression born of slavery, and the numerous social maladies associated with American enslavement.

That early oppression, based on race, resulted in secret discursive practices among the slaves to find disparaging ways to refer to white Americans, and many derogatory terms grew from this process. Some recent evidence of this legacy was on display during the George Zimmerman murder trial pertaining to the wrongful death of Trevon Martin, an African American 17-year-old whom Zimmerman considered to be suspicious, and whom he shot during a confrontation.

Testimony was provided by a young African American woman, Rachel Jeantel, who was the last person to speak with Trevon Martin before he was shot. As she recounted the conversation that she shared with Trevon, under oath, Don West – a defense attorney for George Zimmerman – did his best to discredit Rachel Jeantel through a series of questions that were intended to cast her in a negative light. More precisely, when asked to repeat the conversation she shared with Trevon Martin she mentioned that he stated that he was being followed by a “creepy ass cracker.” Mr. West pounced on this statement, claiming that it confirmed that Trevon Martin had initiated a racist remark. Rachel Jeantel asserted through single word replies that she strongly disagreed with Mr. West’s assertion.

Mr. West: Describing the person is what made you think this was racial?
Ms. Jeantel: Yes.
Mr. West: And that’s because he described him as a “creepy ass cracker”?
Ms. Jeantel: Yes.
Mr. West: So it was racial, but it was because Trevon Martin put race in this?
Ms. Jeantel: No.
Mr. West: You don’t think that’s a racial comment?
Ms. Jeantel: No.
Mr. West: You don’t think that “creepy ass cracker” is a racial comment?
Ms. Jeantel: No.
Mr. West: Are you okay this morning?
Ms. Jeantel: Yes.
Mr. West: You seem so different than yesterday.
On the previous day Ms. Jeantel’s testimony was defiant in tone and demeanor, whereas her remarks during this exchange, all reflected in single word responses, were stated in a calm and quiet voice. Of direct relevance to matters of racial identity is the phrase “creepy ass cracker.” Mr. West was surely mindful of the fact that this expression has racial relevance, because African Americans often use the term “cracker” as a disparaging way to refer to a white person. Yet Ms. Jeantel denied that she thought this term was racial.

In light of the circumstances under which these remarks were made, during a high stakes murder trial, it would appear that Ms. Jeantel was attempting to protect Trevon Martin’s reputation by trying to deflect any suggestion that his comment might have been considered to be “racist,” rather than “racial.” In other words, it would appear that Rachel Jeantel was asserting that Trevon Martin’s comment was merely descriptive, and not intended as a racially demeaning remark. Without question, the phrase “creepy ass cracker” has unmistakable racial relevance, and suggested that Trevon Martin considered Mr. Zimmerman’s pursuit to be “creepy”; that is, unwelcome and causing an uneasy feeling of fear. The transcript confirms that Mr. West did not choose to emphasize the “creepy” part of the comment but favored the suggestion that Trevon Martin’s remarks introduced the specter of race.

Although the preceding illustration is taken from discourse produced during a murder trial, there are many other occasions where racially charged comments take place in institutionalized settings with significant consequences. For example, there have been many allegations pertaining to direct and indirect comments about minority employees that either explicitly or indirectly made reference to the race of workers. School administrators in the state of Delaware were discovered to have shared racist text messages when cell phones that they used were replaced by district employees who happened to stumble on the racially offensive text messages while transferring data to new cell phones.

Whenever discourse is produced under circumstances where people from different racial backgrounds interact, we may find a combination of discursive practices that have racial significance. Racial remarks need not be “racist” per se, although racist comments have been prevalent throughout history; rather, some racial commentaries may be benign or intended to dispel negative stereotypes associated with various groups that might otherwise be characterized in racial terms. References to African Americans, Native Americans, or Latinos may not be racist, although they have racial relevance. Comments referring to Niggers, Redskins, and Wetbacks are almost always racist, derogatory, and disrespectful.

### 6 Preliminary Implications for Future Research

Although we have intentionally concentrated on racial considerations, human identity is far more complicated when viewed in its totality, and particularly so when inherited historical hardships are taken into account (see Baugh 2006). While it is true that different forms of racial discrimination abound globally, so too do discursive practices that are intended to bolster alternative identities, based on a person’s sex, age, disability, or sexual orientation, among others.

Offensive language frequently occurs when insensitive people refer to someone with mental challenges as “retarded,” or if someone who is profoundly deaf is characterized as being “dumb.” As with discursive practices that are racially charged, comments that disparage members of other groups that may have nothing whatsoever to do with race are also subject to the range of negative and positive commentaries, which often change over time.

When making reference to homosexuals, for example, the term “queer” was once considered to be highly offensive and was routinely used in derogatory ways that were explicit in their discriminatory intent. Over time the term “queer” has now been embraced by gay men and
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lesbians, who will often proudly exclaim, “We’re queer and we’re here.” The transformation of terminology that was once offensive into contemporary interpretations that are now embraced by those these terms were originally intended to offend remains complicated; “insiders” may be able to use this terminology within the in-group with positive intent, while “outsiders” who employ the very same terminology may still be viewed as making offensive remarks from the standpoint of group insiders. The use, or lack thereof, of the term “nigger” by blacks or whites in the United States reflects similar patterns of in-group or out-group usage, along with corresponding controversies about the relative offensiveness of the term. Some younger African Americans have gone so far as to suggest that the pronunciation of the final syllable of the word is crucial: a final vocalic schwa syllable /ə/ is considered by them to be positive, whereas the historical /-ɜː/ final syllable pronunciation is still deemed to be highly offensive.

Discursive practices, like all living languages, are constantly undergoing change, and anthropological linguists are in an outstanding position to observe and document these trends as they adapt to new situations and circumstances in speech communities around the world. The combination of speech, writing, and other artefacts that have discursive relevance are particularly well suited to anthropological analyses because they often exceed linguistic behavior and include cultural commodities that symbolize various groups that coexist within a given community. It is my hope that future research in this realm may be of benefit to humanity, serving our better nature in years to come.

Related Topics

7 Language Ideologies (Kroskrity); 8 Social Subordination and Language (Huayhua); 11 Language Socialization and Marginalization (García-Sánchez); 15 Language and Racialization (Chun, Lo); 19 Language and Political Economy (McElhinny); 24 Discrimination via Discourse (Wodak); 25 Racism in the Press (Van Dijk).

References


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