RACISM IN DISCOURSE

Sorana GLIGOR

Abstract

Despite the fact that we are living in the 21st century, the problems connected with multiculturalism are still a source of tension in most of the countries with a great number of immigrants. One of the main negative effects of multiculturalism is the racism. This can manifest itself both in language and physical violence. This article intends to emphasise the most widespread aspects of racism expressed in language in Great Britain.

During the last decades questions of diversity, pluralism, difference and ethnicity have been given more attention than ever before. One of the most analysed topics related to ethnicity, diversity and pluralism is racism.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse some aspects of racism in discourse in Great Britain. In order to analyse racism, a definition of what constitutes racism should be given. As Teun A. van Dijk defines it in *New(s) Racism: A Discourse Analytical Approach,* racism is a social system of ethnic or racial inequality, similar to sexism, or to inequality based on class. That system has two main components, namely a social and a cognitive one. The social component of racism consists of everyday discriminatory practices. On the other hand, social practices also have a cognitive dimension, namely the beliefs people have, such as knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms and values. Thus, racist stereotypes, prejudices and ideologies explain why and how people engage in discriminatory practices, for instance because they think that non-white persons are inferior (less intelligent, less competent, less hardworking), have fewer rights, or that white persons have priority for a house or a job. These beliefs or social representations many members of the dominant (white) group have about immigrants and minorities are largely derived from discourse. That is, discourse as a social practice of racism is at the same time the main source for people's racist beliefs.

Discourse may thus be studied as the link between the social and cognitive dimensions of racism, as people learn racism or anti-racism largely through text or talk. Racist discourse is a form of discriminatory social practice that can manifest itself both in writing and in speech. Together with other (nonverbal) discriminatory practices, racist discourse contributes to the reproduction of racism as a form of ethnic or "racial" domination. It does so typically by expressing or confirming racist opinions, attitudes and ideologies of the dominant ethnic group.

Teun A. van Dijk, in *Racist discourse,* identifies two types of racist discourse: racist discourse *about* ethnically different people and racist discourse *directed at* ethnically different people.

The first form of racist discourse is usually addressed to other dominant group members and is *about* people of different ethnicity or colour. Such discourse may range

BDD-A2758 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:22 UTC)

from informal everyday conversations or organizational dialogues (such as parliamentary debates), to many written or multimedia types of text or communicative events, such as TV shows, movies, news reports, editorials, textbooks, scholarly publications, laws, contracts, and so on.

Racism in the media is of primary importance because media discourse is the main source of people's knowledge, attitudes and ideologies. Most white readers have few daily experiences with minorities and few alternatives of information about them.

The overall characteristic of racist discourse in the media is, as Teun A. van Dijk explains, the negative portrayal of non-white persons, often combined with a positive representation of the white dominant group. Typical for this positive representation of the dominant group is the denial or mitigation of racism.

News reports, political debates or scholarly articles about minorities or immigrants may be biased in the sense that they focus on or imply negative stereotypes. Racism in conversation, media, textbooks and other discourse genres usually appears in three main ways: by emphasising the difference between the dominant group and the minorities, by showing the behaviour of the immigrants as deviant, or by portraying them as a threat to the dominant group.

In the case of emphasising the difference between the non-white immigrants and the dominant group, such emphasis may have a somewhat positive connotation if the immigrants are described in exotic terms. Usually, however, the difference is evaluated negatively: they are portrayed as less smart, less beautiful, less modern, less hardworking, slower, etc. than white people. Non-white immigrants are also seen as being all the same whereas white people are all individually different. These topics are typical in everyday conversations and especially in the mass media.

In the second case, the behaviour of the non-white immigrants is seen as deviant, and hence breaks the norms and rules of the dominant (white) group: they do not (want to) speak English, they wear odd clothes, they have strange habits, they eat strange food, they mistreat their women, and so on. Such topics imply that the immigrants should adapt to the British way of life and abandon all their traditions and customs. However, even when they totally adapt, they will still be seen as different.

Thirdly, the non-white immigrants may be portrayed as a threat to the white dominant group. Thus, immigration is represented as an invasion and the immigrants are seen as invaders occupying the space that belongs to the white people, taking their jobs and their houses. However, the most prominent threat theme is crime. In everyday conversations, the media and political discourse, various kinds of crime, such as assault, passport fraud, robbery and drugs, invariably show up as a permanent association with minorities and immigrants. Indeed, the common expression 'ethnic crime' suggests that such crime is seen as a special and different category. On the other hand, 'normal' topics – political, economic, cultural – are seldom associated with minorities. Positive news about black people usually feature champions in sports or musicians.

Racism in discourse not only controls the content or topics, but it may appear at all levels of text and talk, that is, at the visual level, the sound level (volume, intonation), syntax (word order), semantics (meaning and reference), style (variable uses of words and word order), rhetoric (persuasive uses of grammar), pragmatics (speech acts such as assertions or threats), interaction, and so on.

BDD-A2758 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:22 UTC)

A way of emphasizing what the immigrants do wrong is by using the active voice in articles about crimes committed by them. On the other hand, if an article or a discussion is about racism or police harassment, the passive voice is used to mitigate such acts that are inconsistent with a positive image of the dominant group ("They were harassed by the police", or "They were harassed" instead of the direct active phrase "Police harassed black youths").

Similar forms of emphasis and mitigation are managed by rhetorical figures, such as hyperboles and euphemisms. Thus, few Western countries or institutions explicitly deal with own racism, and both in political discourse and well as in the media, many forms of mitigation are being used, such as "discrimination", "bias", or even "popular discontent". On the other hand, the opposite takes place whenever the immigrants do something. Thus, immigration is often described by the military metaphor of an invasion, which makes people see it as a threat or at least as a major problem, instead of as an important and necessary contribution to the economy and the demography. Similarly, large groups of immigrants or asylum seekers are described not only in large numbers, but in terms of threatening amounts of water or snow in which one may drown: waves, floods, avalanches, etc. Also, in politics and the media, they use the strategy of constantly emphasizing how many new people have arrived. On the other hand, one never reads in the paper how many of the earlier immigrants or other people have *left* the country. This is another strategy meant to represent immigration as a threat.

As mentioned above, racism in discourse is present not only in words but also in the visual information, such as page lay out, placement, pictures, tables, and so on, as is the case in the press, or sounds and film on TV or on the internet. Thus, articles in the press that are about crimes or violence committed by non-white immigrants tend to appear on the front-page, on top, in large articles, with big headlines, with prominent pictures in which they are represented as aggressive and the white dominant group or the police as victims. On the other hand, racism, or the harassment of blacks by the police will seldom occupy such a prominent place, and will tend to be placed on the inner pages, to less substantial articles, and not emphasized in headlines.

The second form of racist discourse refers to the many discriminatory ways dominant group members verbally interact with members of dominated groups: ethic minorities, immigrants, refugees, etc. They may do so by using derogatory slurs, insults, impolite forms of address, and other forms of discourse that explicitly express and enact superiority and lack of respect. Since today such blatant forms of verbal discrimination are generally considered "politically incorrect," much racist discourse directed at dominated ethnic group members tends to become more subtle and indirect. Thus, white speakers may interrupt minority speakers inappropriately, ignore the topics suggested by their interlocutors, choose topics that imply negative characteristics of the ethnic minority group the recipient belongs to, speak too loudly, show a bored face, avoid eye contact, use a haughty intonation, and many other manifestations of lack of respect. Minority group members are very often confronted with such racist talk, and not because of what they do or say but only because they are different. They are thus subjected to an accumulating and aggravating form of racist harassment that is a direct threat to their well-being and the quality of their life.

In his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon points out some ways of discriminating non-white immigrants through the way they are spoken to.

BDD-A2758 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:22 UTC)

Many white people, according to Fanon, talk differently to black people or Asians than to other white people. For instance, a doctor talking to Europeans may say "Please sit down…Why do you wish to consult me?…What are your symptoms?…", whereas when talking to a Negro or an Arab, he will probably say "Sit there, boy…What's bothering you?…Where does it hurt, huh?…"

Although they may consider themselves anti-racist, such people motivate their way of speaking to Negroes in the following way: "Oh, I know the blacks. They must be spoken to kindly; talk to them about their country; it's all in knowing how to talk to them." or "Talking to Negroes in this way gets down to their level, it puts them at ease, it is an effort to make them understand us, it reassures them…"

A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts whispering and patronizing. Fanon claims to have seen such behaviour in hundreds of people, especially policemen, physicians and employers.

The writer gives another example of an educated Negro, who is on a train and asks another passenger: "I beg your pardon, sir, would you mind telling me where the dinning-car is?" And the white man answers in pidgin-nigger: "Sure, fella. You go out door, see, go corridor, you go straight, go one car, go two car, go three car, you there."

To speak pidgin to a Negro makes him angry and perpetuates a state of conflict. Although the other person may have no intention to anger him, it is just this indifference, this automatic manner of classifying him, seeing him as primitive and uncivilized, that makes him angry.

Another way of discriminating black people is by always pointing out their colour, their origin, usually unnecessarily and irrelevantly: "I want you to meet my black friend", "Dr.Wilson, who saved this man's life, is a Negro", "Sidney Cook, one of the best Negro painters", "David Stevens, a black man and a university professor" or, as Fanon says: "When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my colour. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my colour."

Nowadays a Negro priest is no more an occasion for wonder. There are Negro physicians, professors, statesmen, but something out of the ordinary still clings to such cases: "Our doctor is coloured. He is very experienced", "We have a Black chemistry teacher. He is quite clever". This gives the feeling that if the physician made a mistake it would be the end of him and of all those who came after him. The black physician can never be sure how close he is to disgrace.

The English language also has proverbs and sayings that can offend a black person. The sayings reflect the major architecture of social relations. Molefi Kete Asante, in *Identifying Racist Language: Linguistic Acts and Signs*, gives such an example. In a major university, a white professor, frustrated over the stubbornness of an issue in a faculty meeting, said that the solution was "like finding a nigger in a woodstack." He later apologized to the black persons present in the meeting because he immediately saw from their reactions that it was offensive speech. Obviously, it wasn't considered offensive within his own value system.

Another example of racism in discourse that Molefi Kete Asante gives is that of a white woman who says to the black detective who wants to search her apartment, "You can look inside any room, I ain't got nothing to steal anyway." The woman is using the predictable pattern of discourse related to values and beliefs about black people.

Statements like "I, personally, like black people", "There are also intelligent blacks, but ...", "I believe that black people...", "I think it is true that you people...", "I don't have

BDD-A2758 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:22 UTC)

anything against your kind...", "What you people should do is follow the pattern of the whites who were poor" or "To get ahead in this society you people will have to work hard" or "My parents were not racists but they just did not want to live next to blacks" also belong to racist discourse, as they imply that there is a great difference between black people and white people. Such statements are meant to offend and are almost always made in the presence of the person to be offended.

In conclusion, at all levels and dimensions of text and talk, racism and prejudice may daily be expressed, enacted and reproduced by discourse. But racist speech is created by people. Human intervention is responsible for racism in language. Racist societies and institutions produce racist discourses, and racist discourses reproduce the stereotypes, prejudices and ideologies that are used to defend and legitimise white dominance. In this way dominant elite talk and text contributes to the reproduction of racism.

Racist language is an integral part of the British life. Language is only a regularized code, containing lexical and syntactical elements, accepted by a community of speakers. The English language contains all the generalized assumptions of the society, which are profoundly racist. Even if the language were cleaned up today and the structure of knowledge remained or the people's conceptions of race remained, offensive racist language would be generated just as soon as the offending words and expressions were eliminated. New ones would be developed. This doesn't mean that a change cannot be made. New social information must provide people with new opportunities for change. In order for this change to be possible, it is necessary not only to bet against the offensive speech found in the English language, but also to reject racist ideas and feelings. In order to eliminate racist language, racism itself must be eliminated.

Bibliography

Asante, Molefi Kete, *Identifying Racist Language: Linguistic Acts and Signs,* at www.asante.net
Fanon, Frantz (1993) *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press
Van Dijk, Teun A, *New(s) Racism: A Discourse Analytical Approach,* at www.daneprairie.com
Van Dijk, Teun A. (2003) "Racist discourse", Ellis Cashmore (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia for Race and Ethnic Studies***.** London: Routledge .

BDD-A2758 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:22:22 UTC)