Polyphonic Approaches to Race in Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The ways in which we talk and write about the constructs of race and ethnicity are influenced by our societal systems, which tend to serve the more powerful and perpetuate a monologic discourse. Bakhtin and Babha, representing literary theory and post-colonial thought respectively, provide the theoretical means, and end goal, of an alternative paradigm of polyphony. Taking a polyphonic perspective on how discourse analysis has treated "race talk" illuminates major issues, as well as the contradictions reflected in our language use, symbolism and structures. Discourse analysis itself can be seen as a "third space" in which multiple voices can be heard and interrelate. This article gives a synthesis of four approaches to race and ethnicity in discourse analysis, highlighting polyphony as a means of moving from the acknowledgement of racial injustice in language to addressing and dismantling it. In particular, I highlight the (re)presentation of ethnographic research as a symbolic move from homophonic to polyphonic discourse about ethnicity and race theory.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, race theory, polyphony, ethnicity, ethnography.

> Hearing another rhythm to fit alongside the rhythms of an ensemble is basically…a way of being steady within a context of multiple rhythms. Only through the combined rhythms does the music emerge, and the only way to hear the music properly, to find the beat…is to listen to at least two rhythms at once. You should attempt to hear as many rhythms as possible working together yet remaining distinct.
>
> John Miller Chernoff (as cited in Davis, 1996, para.16)

What if this sonorous fullness built by individual rhythms could be transferred to text and talk in society? Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) uses a similar theme in his philosophical approach to literature, applying the advantages of a polyphony in which "voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony" (p. 21). Voices, like rhythms or tunes, can "overlap and interpenetrate without necessarily collapsing into a harmonic unity or consonance, thereby maintaining the paradox of "simultaneous difference" (Davis, 1996, para.4). Theory too, benefits from existing in simultaneous difference, making polyphony a potent illustration of one of the core strengths of interdisciplinary study.

I will apply the concept of polyphony in an examination of issues of race and ethnicity in discourse analysis. Taken together, four distinct strands of discourse analysis attributed primarily to van Dijk, Wodak, Jäger and Wetherell, provide a full-voiced representation of what is more casually termed "race talk." Polyphony, as an image and theory, can also be used to move beyond analysis of discourse. Applied as both a means and an end in efforts to delegitimize racialized discourse, the notion of including and amplifying a multiplicity of voices has broad applications for the analysis of language and its (re)presentations in many disciplinary fields.

Race Talk in Discourse Analysis

There are problems inherent in using the term "race." Susan Condor (1988) argues that "by using racial categories we are complicit in obscuring the power bases and connotations in the deployment of social

categories" (p.77). In the same vein are suggestions that because race is a constructed idea, we must "eliminate all notions of race as a thing in itself with which to exert power" (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p. 179). While it is possible that simply discussing the construct of race engages in the perpetuation of some meta-level discrimination, I see little option—other than silencing the discussion. So, I aim to work towards removing the exposure and misuse of the illusory construct of race rather than attempting the immediately impossible task of erasing entirely the disharmony and destruction it causes.

As "malleable discursive construction[s]," the concepts of race and ethnicity are created and perpetuated through language (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p.123). They are firmly entrenched, as ideas and practice, in our identities and the structures of society. Moreover, the classifications of race and ethnicity are continually reified in society as reflected in, and constructed by, words, images, and symbols. Discourse analysis provides a specific tool to bring us towards a more concrete understanding of how the notion of race and its socio-cultural repercussions are manifested in language, and in society.

The practice of discourse analysis is defined simply as "the analysis of language as it is used to enact activities, perspectives, and identities" (Gee, 1999, p.4) or, "the discipline devoted to the investigation of the relationship between form and function in verbal communication" (Renkema, 2004, p.1). Both of these definitions highlight the relational quality of discourse analysis. This discipline supplies particular insight by applying highly structured conceptualizations and methodologies to the seemingly amorphous communications that we perform through text and talk; discourse analysis orders the "technical linguistic building bricks of social construction" (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p.3). It is, at its core, an action that can be applied very specifically. In this case, it is applied to the language of race, ethnicity, and discrimination. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Race and Ethnic Studies* (2004) describes the reproduction of racism through discourse in society and institutions as a system through which "the symbolic, discursive circle is closed and dominant elite talk and text contributes to the reproduction of racism" (Cashmore, p. 353). Because it continually reflects and propagates a widespread, historically constructed concept, racialized language is a highly important and contentious issue. For individuals, and on a systemic level, matters of race continue to pervade identities, relationships, and societal and institutional function. This makes racialized language a vital and particularly fecund arena for discourse analysis.

We do not have to look very far in any direction to see that "people in power can and do, through discourse, discount other voices" (Wetherell, 2003, p.19-20). The perpetuation of racism and ethnic discrimination through language is both a representation and a production of a worldview that privileges one dominant (usually white, male, and educated) narrative. Moreover, the power of this narrative is often "invisible" because dominant discourses become "so powerful that they are the orthodoxy, almost entirely persuasive, beyond which we can barely think" (Wetherell, 2003, p.14). The use of racialized language is one way in which discourse reflects societal power dynamics. The hegemonic use of racialized language not only limits understanding but has a silencing effect on the less powerful voices in society. That is not to say such voices are not present and capable of expression, but they are not *heard* equally because "a monologic world does not recognize someone else's thought, someone else's idea, as an object of representation" (Bahktin, 1984, p.79). To counter a powerful monologic system, multiple perspectives or voices must be amplified. A polyphonic approach to societal issues such as racial discourse begins with the acknowledgement of the need for this multiplicity.

Polyphony as a theoretical framework:

We can extrapolate one way of accomplishing this polyphonic analysis from Bakhtin's (1984) theory of double-voiced discourse which is "directed both toward the referential object of speech and toward another's discourse, towards someone else's speech" (p.185). Discourse, in this view, cannot help but take historical context into account because to speak is to be aware that our language is not original or independent, but interconnected with a larger context that is permeated with the words of others (Bakhtin, 1984, p.196). Bakhtin (1984) presents an alternative to the homophony that creates, and is created by, socio-political systems of racial inequality, asserting that:

> the weakening or destruction of a monologic context occurs only when there is a coming together of two utterances equally and directly oriented toward a referential object. Two discourses equally and directly toward a referential object within the limits of a single context cannot exist side by side without intersecting dialogically (p.189).

This dialogical intersection can be made possible through discourse analysis, particularly in the use of multiple approaches. An analysis of text and talk may seem like an individual enterprise, but examining various perspectives on race together reflects the relational nature of discourse analysis. The result is a polyphonic or vari-directional discourse, in which the more powerful narrative no longer "oppressively dominates the others' thought'" (Bahktin, 1984, p.198).

Adding further dimension to this analysis, post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1990) calls the point where different discourses can coexist a "third space" (p. 216) where many ideas are mutually created and co-exist in the same space while remaining distinct from each other (Bhabha, 1994, p.208). Multiple, even contrary, viewpoints can be recorded and presented, informing each other and yet remaining distinct, allowing "new positions to emerge" (Bhabha, 1990, p.211). In this way, discourse analysis *itself* can be said to function as the "third space" in which polyphony can come to fruition. To illustrate this I will briefly outline how four major perspectives on race in discourse studies contribute to a deeper understanding of racialized language. Basing the structure for this analysis broadly on Wodak and Reisigl's (1999) overview, *Discourse and Racism: European Perspectives*, it is admittedly focused on, though not entirely limited to, a European context.

A method that draws from various sources is especially important for issues that historically amplify some points of view while muffling others. While it is true that the dominant monologic narrative is powerful, language is also an instrument whose meaning varies depending on how it is practiced. Racialized language, in particular, requires a constant awareness of "practices which often leave us morally complicit with harm and injustice unless we attempt to transform them" (Gee, 1999, p. 8). Discourse analysis examines racialized and racist discourse on individual and systemic levels; by examining this analysis, we begin to think about how it can assist in creating a more polyphonic society.

Polyphony as a means: Approaches to race in discourse analysis

van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach

As one of the leading theorists of racial issues in discourse analysis, Teun van Dijk (2002) conducted a large number of studies analyzing language used in widely various media: T.V., newspaper, textbooks, political discourse, and "everyday talk" (p.155). van Dijk (2002) contends that language is primarily reflective of an individual's inner values (p.151), suggesting underlying prejudices are reflected in language which leads to the reproduction of racism (p.158). van Dijk (2000) assesses what he calls "new" racism wherein overt racial discrimination became politically incorrect (or illegal!) and shifted to more subtle manifestations. As discourse, the new (structural) racism avoids explicit labels but uses "codewords" (e.g. welfare mother, inner-city, illegal immigrant) making the study of racism "more symbolic and encoded than a recognition of the blatantly discriminatory" (van Dijk, 2000, p. 39-41). van Dijk bases his arguments on theory grounded in both discursive psychology and cognitive linguistics, emphasizing the process by which the brain orders our experience (Lee, 2003, p.61). Analysis of racial discourse, in this socio-cognitive approach, is the study of how "society gives voice to racism" as well as the ways that "voiced racism" constructs and changes the socially created cognition of individuals (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p.3).

van Dijk's (2002) studies also reveal how talk and text between people who identify themselves as a group (elite groups in particular) create their own beliefs about race and ethnicity "as a means of creating in-group cohesion and maintaining and legitimating dominance" (p.49). This continual process of "othering" is manifested through discourse on race and ethnicity that constructs and perpetuates cultural identity through language (Babha, 1990, p.219). It perpetuates the complications implicit in Franz Fanon's (1967) assertion that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (p.110). Specifically, van Dijk (2000) finds this racial and ethnic "othering" occurs through in-group use of syntactical structures such as "casting minorities in passive roles" (p.40), lexical choices such as words that are recognizable as "code words," as well as the use of hyperbole and euphemism (van Dijk, 1993, p.105).

Wodak's historical context approach

According to van Dijk there is a constant creation and communication of meaning that comes from and moves through the individual and society through discourse. However, his focus upon individual psychology in discourse leaves gaps. The historical approach of theorists such as Ruth Wodak fills part

of this in, asserting that context of the discourse "has a significant impact on the structure, function and content of prejudice stories" (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p.187).

This approach is based on a view of the world in which language simultaneously reflects and constructs the situation in which it is used. James Gee (1999) summarizes the task of studying context in a historical discourse approach as a two-pronged need to *create* meaning based on history that also *interprets* "the context to be a certain way and not another based on the situated meanings we assemble" (p.47). If meaning is created and explicated through use, then overlooking historical and situational context in discourse studies is like an orchestra attempting to play without knowing the tempo; regardless of individual skill or fervour, there can be no coherence. Wodak & Reisigl (1999) identified four specific strategies used in racialized discourse: constructive, justificatory, transformative, and destructive. They found that the strategy a person used in dialogue was dependent almost entirely upon context, thereby showing that context plays at least as important a role as individual identity (p.188).

Like setting a tempo, context in discourse informs structure, and also provides a theoretical and conceptual basis for further analysis. Historical context is particularly important for studying the ways we talk about ethnicity and discrimination. We must take into account the complex hierarchies of influence and the vast implications of racist ideology and action over human history, and we must do so bearing in mind that history is most often recorded in a discursive system that privileges the powerful. Awareness, and even analysis, of historical context is therefore necessary, but it is not complete. A historical approach needs to also be presented alongside a "counter-discursive" perspective that "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force" (Babha, 1994, p.37). This counter-discourse functions as a parallel and subversion of the often racialized dominant narrative of "imperial ideology" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000, p. 56). Wodak begins to formulate this through her analysis of racism and anti-Semitism, but the importance of context in understanding the multiple voices that constitute society can be examined even more critically to greater effect.

Duisberg group's collective symbols and power dynamics

As in Wodak's historical practice of discourse analysis, social, political, and historical contexts are essential elements of the approach practiced by S. Jäger and the Duisberg group (Wodak & Reisgl, 1999, p.193). Like van Dijk, they analyze media, though their particular approach focuses on the themes of discourse strands (such as discourse on "foreigners") and collective symbols. Upon finding "widespread latent and manifest forms of racism" through their media analysis, the Duisberg group then focused on how racial discourse is socially created (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p.193). They theorized that collective symbols are acquired through socialization and that discourse functions as the constructed and maintained system of these symbols. An example of a collective symbol is the use of the metaphor of the "subversive" submarine (*U-boot*) when talking about immigrants (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p.192).

All of discourse analysis is based to some extent on semiotics, which insists that "texts are…constructions of signs which [can] be analyzed to illustrate how meaning [i]s generated" (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p.8). The added significance of this inherent meaning in text and talk is that the symbols of racial discourse are not just individual but collective. Post-colonial writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1994) notes that language is "inseparable from ourselves as community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world" (p.442). It follows that a large part of understanding societies' attitudes towards racial issues includes an analysis of the language and symbols that society collectively employs. The Duisberg group's analysis reflects the importance of historical context for discourse, as well its social construction.

They also add a focus on power dynamics. Greatly influenced by the theory of Michel Foucault, Jäger and the Duisberg group analyze how the group that dominates society uses collective symbols to "stigmatize, marginalize, and exclude minority groups" (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p.193). In particular, they place great importance on societal power and its role in how "discourse constructs, denotes and produces objects of knowledge in an intelligible way while at the same time excluding other ways of reasoning as unintelligible" (Barker & Galasinki, 2001, p.12). Like Bahktin's notion of monologic discourse, Foucault's emphasis on power highlights the privileging of one dominant viewpoint. Racism, and the way it occurs in discourse, is inextricably linked to hegemonic power. The impact for discourse

analysts is that meaning "is regulated by power, which governs not only what can be said under determinate social and cultural conditions, but also who can speak, when and where" (Barker & Galansinki, 2001, p.12). Ascertaining the context of power relations is, then, a critical component in the discourse analysis of matters of race. Added to a historical approach, the ideological undercurrent of societal power dynamics provides a fuller understanding of how language is created in and influenced by both situational context and individual identity.

Wetherell's poststructuralist approach

A fourth, and final, perspective is typified in the work of Margaret Wetherell and James Potter, who oppose socio-cognitive approaches, such as that of van Dijk, because their focus on the cognitive aspect of analyzing race talk can "universalize the conditions for racism" (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p.194). Wetherell's (1992) viewpoint is that discourse actively constructs (and is constructed by) social and psychological processes (p.8-9).

Discourse, in this approach, is anti-essentialist in ideology, and follows Derrida's claim that "all cultures are zones of shifting boundaries and hybridization" (Barker & Galasinki, 2001, p.11). The starting place for Wetherell's approach to discourse analysis is based on the theory that language is "regulated" through discourses which "define, construct and produce their objects of knowledge" (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p.31). Though this approach seems contradictory to the other three, they can exist as counter-points to each other when applied in the same space, if we can, as Chernoff suggests, "listen to at least two rhythms at once" (as cited in Davis, 1996).

Applied specifically to issues of race, Wetherell's analysis comes from a different direction than the other approaches, but her conclusions are not dissimilar. She maintains that we create and perpetuate inequalities though discourse, particularly "when enough discursive resources can be mobilized to make colonial practices of…the 'way we do things'" (Wetherell, 2003, p.13). Referring to both social and historical construction of discourse by a dominant discursive power, she nevertheless upholds a post-structuralist framework. She suggests that "racism must be viewed as a series of ideological effects with flexible, fluid, and varying contents" focusing on the nature of both discourse and racism as "dynamic and contradictory" (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p.194).

In order to effectively analyze discourse of such a shifting nature, Wetherell and Potter (1992) use the metaphor of mapping, illustrating that although discourse seems intangible, it is indeed "a material which can be explored and charted" (p. 2). They employ a detailed method that borrows from ethnography, social psychology, and post-structuralism (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p.195). By mapping their close analysis of racialized discourse in New Zealand, they aim to illustrate how society "gives voice" to racism and how "forms of discourse institute, solidify, change, create, and reproduce social formations" (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p.3). Wetherell's approach works in harmony here with other theorists who point to the importance of social manifestations of discourse.

Using an ethnographic methodology common in discourse analysis, Wetherell (2003) believes that investigating the data from the analysis of interviews shows discursive patterns. While it has limitations, ethnographic research, from analysts such as Wetherell, is an example of polyphony in discourse analysis practice. The multiple voices recorded and represented as unique parts of a greater whole function as an example of a linchpin between discourse analysis theory and its practical application. After all, "discourse analysis must have a point" (Gee, 1999, p.8).

Polyphony as an end:

The four approaches to the discourse analysis of race and ethnicity provide a varied and polyphonic whole, while each supplying a unique strand of thought. They are united in the belief that "racism, as a social construct, as a social practice, and as an ideology, manifests itself discursively" (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p.175). If this is the case, discourse can surely serve the opposite purpose in helping to break down the historically constructed ill-effects of racial discrimination, serving "to criticize, delegitimate, and argue against racist opinions and practices, i.e. to pursue anti-racist strategies" (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p.176). These "ill-effects" exist on more than the level of individual identity, thus any change in discourse must be multi-leveled as well: "Since there is no such thing as a private language, rethinking is a social and political activity" (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p.48).

The imagery of polyphony is a useful means of examining the analysis of racial discourse. Polyphony can

similarly provide a structure for a counter-discourse that exposes and ultimately delegitimizes racialized discourse in society. While I can't claim to be able to bring about this final step, I will provide an example of a method for application that is polyphonic in both its structure and outcome. This application can, and should, vary according to situational factors, but in any situation there are two immediate practical applications for discourse analysis of race talk. The first is awareness and the second, presentation (or representation). These two are so intertwined that they are often simultaneous.

Awareness of racialized discourse can be represented to great effect through works of art, such as: visual art, music, writing, theatre, or any multi-media form. Many discourse analysts already use multiple forms to present their research; Wetherell's mapping of race talk in New Zealand, or Wodak's interviews in Eastern Europe could be further (re)presented in multi-media formats. Ethnographic interviews, a widely practiced research method, can be transcribed into performance that is both thought-provoking and moving. The most well-known example of this is Anna Deveare Smith's one-woman productions beginning with *Fires in the Mirror* (1993). Basing this script entirely on interviews after racially-based violence in New York, Deveare Smith raised awareness by embodying and presenting multiple voices and experiences. This brought perspectives that were otherwise unrepresented into full view, or, more precisely, full voice. This also gave the unique opportunity of hearing those perspectives *together* at *once*, illuminating their various harmonies and disharmonies.

Staging, or otherwise artistically representing ethnographic discourse analysis research is an example of a polyphonic, interdisciplinary technique to raise awareness, ignite discussion, and effect change on individual and societal levels. Awareness of the realities of our individual and societal use of racialized discourse also serves as a call for transparency through exposure, such as van Dijk's (2000) findings of widespread media usage of racial "code words." The interdisciplinary possibilities for such representation are limited only by the imagination of the practitioner—and, of course, the contextually variable, but very real limitations of the racialized society that our language reflects.

The end goal is functional social polyphony where all voices speak, and are heard, even if they do not agree. Though that goal may not be immediately viable, awareness of the source and impact of the racialized language we use as individual, and as a society, can serve as a prelude to it. Despite their different approaches to issues of race and ethnicity, discourse analysts such as van Dijk, Wodak, Jäger, Wetherwell and their many colleagues, might agree that their practice holds a unique opportunity to perform polyphonic analysis in a "third space." Their findings can be applied across disciplines by (re)presenting the many complex ways we use (and misuse) race talk as individuals, societies, and institutions. From there, we can begin discussing how to amplify a counter-discourse that dismantles the dominant homophony. Opening discursive space for a polyphony of perspectives is not only more historically correct and ethically just; it is vital for the expression of a society where "only through the combined rhythms does the music emerge" (Chernoff, as cited in Davis, 1996).

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