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# Discourse and the denial of racism

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**ABSTRACT.** Within the broader framework of a research programme on the reproduction of racism in discourse and communication, the present article examines the prominent role of the denial of racism, especially among the elites, in much contemporary text and talk about ethnic relations. After a conceptual analysis of denial strategies in interpersonal impression formation on the one hand, and within the social-political context of minority and immigration management on the other, various types of denial are examined in everyday conversations, press reports and parliamentary debates. Among these forms of denial are disclaimers, mitigation, euphemism, excuses, blaming the victim, reversal and other moves of defence, face-keeping and positive self-presentation in negative discourse about minorities, immigrants and (other) anti-racists.

**KEY WORDS:** conversation, denial, discourse, elites, ethnic minorities, France, Germany, immigrants, impression management, the Netherlands, news reports, parliamentary debates, racism, text, United Kingdom, USA

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## DISCOURSE AND RACISM

One of the crucial properties of contemporary racism is its denial, typically illustrated in such well-known disclaimers as 'I have nothing against blacks, but . . .'. This article examines the discursive strategies, as well as the cognitive and social functions, of such and other forms of denial in different genres of text and talk about ethnic or racial affairs.

The framework of this study is an interdisciplinary research programme at the University of Amsterdam that deals with the reproduction of racism through discourse and communication. In this research programme several projects have been carried out that analysed everyday conversations, textbooks, news in the press, parliamentary discourse and other forms of public and organizational communication (van Dijk, 1984, 1987a, 1987b, 1991).

The guiding idea behind this research is that ethnic and racial prejudices are prominently acquired and shared within the white dominant group through everyday conversation and institutional text and talk. Such dis-

course serves to express, convey, legitimate or indeed to conceal or deny such negative ethnic attitudes. Therefore, a systematic and subtle discourse analytical approach should be able to reconstruct such social cognitions about other groups.

It is further assumed in this research programme that talk and text about minorities, immigrants, refugees or, more generally, about people of colour or Third World peoples and nations, also have broader societal, political and cultural functions. Besides positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, such discourse signals group membership, white ingroup allegiances and, more generally, the various conditions for the reproduction of the white group and their dominance in virtually all social, political and cultural domains.

The theoretical framework that organizes this research programme is complex and multidisciplinary. Systematic descriptions of text and talk require an explicit theory of discourse. Relating such discourse structures to mental representations such as models, attitudes and ideologies about ethnic events, groups and the ethnic organization of society and culture, presupposes a sophisticated psychology of social cognitions. And a study of the functions of discourse in the reproduction of white group dominance should take place within the broader perspective of a social and cultural theory of racism and ethnicism.

Such a multidisciplinary approach to the role of discourse and communication in the reproduction of racism first operates at the societal micro-level of everyday situated interactions, discourse and social cognitions of individual group members. Secondly, this micro-level 'reality' of racism 'implements' the overall structures and processes of dominance and inequality at the meso- and macro-levels of groups, social formations, neighbourhoods, institutions, organizations and even nations and whole world regions. At the same time, the study of the interdependency of the micro- and macro-structures of racism, also requires an analysis of the relations between cognition and action, that is, at the micro-level, between mental models of group members and their practices, and at the macro-level, between social group attitudes and ideologies, on the one hand, and societal structures, on the other hand.

Another important hypothesis that emerges from this earlier work is that political, media, academic, corporate and other elites play an important role in the reproduction of racism. They are the ones who control or have access to many types of public discourse, have the largest stake in maintaining white group dominance, and are usually also most proficient in persuasively formulating their ethnic opinions. Although there is of course a continuous interplay between elite and popular forms of racism, analysis of many forms of discourse suggests that the elites in many respects 'preformulate' the kind of ethnic beliefs of which, sometimes more blatant, versions may then get popular currency. Indeed, many of the more 'subtle', 'modern', 'everyday' or 'new' forms of cultural racism, or ethnicism, studied below, are taken from elite discourse (see van Dijk, 1987b, 1992, for detail). This hypothesis is not inconsistent with the possibility that

(smaller, oppositional) elite groups also play a prominent role in the pre-formulation of anti-racist ideologies.

Within this complex theoretical framework, our earlier studies of text and talk examined, among other structures, dominant topics of discourse, text schemata, for instance those of story-telling and argumentation, as well as local semantic moves (such as the disclaimer mentioned above), style, rhetoric and specific properties of conversational interaction.

We suggested above that one of the results of this earlier work was that in text and talk about ethnic or racial minorities, many white people follow a double strategy of positive self-presentation, on the one hand, and a strategy of expressing subtle, indirect or sometimes more blatant forms of negative other-presentation, on the other hand. Indeed, especially in public discourse, outgroup derogation seldom takes place without expressions of ingroup favouritism or social face-keeping.

#### THE DENIAL OF RACISM

The denial of racism is one of the moves that is part of the latter strategy of positive ingroup presentation. General norms and values, if not the law, prohibit (blatant) forms of ethnic prejudice and discrimination, and many if not most white group members are both aware of such social constraints and, up to a point, even share and acknowledge them (Billig, 1988). Therefore, even the most blatantly racist discourse in our data routinely features denials or at least mitigations of racism. Interestingly, we have found that precisely the more racist discourse tends to have disclaimers and other denials. This suggests that language users who say negative things about minorities are well aware of the fact that they may be understood as breaking the social norm of tolerance or acceptance.

Denials of racism, and similar forms of positive self-presentation, have both an *individual* and a *social* dimension. Not only do most white speakers individually resent being perceived as racists, also, and even more importantly, such strategies may at the same time aim at defending the ingroup as a whole: 'We are not racists', 'We are not a racist society'.

Whereas the first, individual, form of denial is characteristic of informal everyday conversations, the second is typical for public discourse, for instance in politics, the media, education, corporations and other organizations. Since public discourse potentially reaches a large audience, it is this latter, social form of denial that is most influential and, therefore, also most damaging: it is the social discourse of denial that persuasively helps construct the dominant white consensus. Few white group members would have reason or interest, to doubt let alone to oppose such a claim.

Face-keeping or positive self-presentation are well-known phenomena in social psychology, sociology and communication research, and are part of the overall strategy of impression management (Brewer, 1988; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi, 1981). In

interaction, people try to act, and hence to speak, in such a way that their interlocutors construct an 'impression' of them that is as positive as possible, or at least speakers try to avoid a negative impression (Arkin, 1981).

Theoretically, impressions are person representations, that is, mental schemata that feature an organized set of categories by which people are judged, usually along several dimensions and with respect to several social norms, interests or criteria. Such judgements may be local or situational, and pertain to current actions or cognitions, but they may also be about more permanent, context independent, 'personality' characteristics of an individual.

It may be assumed that whereas people may want to avoid a negative impression in any situation, they are probably more anxious to avoid a general negative evaluation about their personality, than to avoid a negative judgement about one particular action in one specific situation. To be categorized as 'a racist' or even as being 'intolerant', presupposes a more enduring characteristic of people, and is therefore a judgement that is particularly face-threatening. Hence, when speakers emphasize that 'they have nothing against blacks' (or other minority groups), such disclaimers focus on a more permanent attitude, rather than on the specific (negative) opinion now being expressed about some specific outgroup member or some specific ethnic or racial action or event.

What such disclaimers try to do, thus, is to block inferences from this particular instance to a more general impression. After all, a specific negative opinion about a particular ethnic group member or a particular act, may well be found to be justified, whereas a more general negative opinion about ethnic minorities might be seen as constitutive of a racist attitude.

In the latter case, a negative attitude may be found acceptable only when pertaining to a specific characteristic of a group, for instance when someone assumes that refugees often enter the country illegally, or when blacks are seen as insufficiently 'motivated' to get a good education or to get a job. In that case, the judgement may be warranted with references to (alleged) negative actions or attitudes of the outgroup. It is not surprising, therefore, that when such negative judgements are qualified as 'racist', racism is emphatically denied.

We see below that in such cases the charge is often reversed: the person who accuses the other as racist is in turn accused of inverted racism against whites, as oversensitive and exaggerating, as intolerant and generally as 'seeing racism where there is none', as Right-wing British newspapers like to put it (van Dijk, 1991). Accusations of racism, then, soon tend to be seen as more serious social infractions than racist attitudes or actions themselves, e.g. because they disrupt ingroup solidarity and smooth ingroup encounters: they are felt to ruin the 'good atmosphere' of interactions and situations. Moreover, such accusations are seen to impose taboos, prevent free speech and a 'true' or 'honest' assessment of the ethnic situation. In other words, denials of racism often turn into counter-accusations of intolerant and intolerable anti-racism.

## TYPES OF DENIAL

We see that denials come in many forms, each with its own cognitive, emotional, social, political and cultural functions. We have situational and general denials, personal ones and group-based ones. Although people who speak about other groups usually talk as ingroup members, there may well be a tension between individual opinions and those shared by the ingroup. Those who deny that they are racists usually imply that they comply with the general, official group norm that prohibits racism, and that, therefore, they are decent citizens. Such individual disclaimers often presuppose that the whole group is not racist.

On the other hand, there may be situations where individuals deny racist opinions or practices while acknowledging that the group as a whole, or at least some or many other group members, may not share such tolerance. Such combined denials/admissions are rare, however, since criticizing the ingroup may be a characteristic strategy of anti-racists (Taguieff, 1988), whereas denials of individual racism are often typical of racist opinions. On the other hand, individual denials of racism may strategically be made by comparison to 'others', e.g. one's neighbours or customers, and then takes the form of a *transfer* move: 'I have nothing against them, but you know my customers don't like to deal with black personnel.. .

The act of denial itself, thus, also comes in different guises. Generally, denials are part of a strategy of *defence*, presupposing explicit or implicit accusations. In that case, people may deny to have engaged in negative acts, to have broken the law or some social norm, or to have some negative, overall personality characteristic of which they are *actually* accused by an interlocutor. On the other hand, denials may also be pre-emptive, as is the case in positive self-presentation or face-keeping, that is, they may focus on *possible* inferences of the interlocutor.

Action is theoretically analysed as a combination of cognition (intention) and activity. One may admit having engaged in an action that may have been interpreted as negative, but at the same time deny the negative cognitive counterpart: 'I did not intend it that way.' That is, in strategies of defence, the crucial condition of responsibility for negative action lies in intentions: good intentions are seen as implementations of good attitudes, and hence as characteristic of good social membership or good citizenship.

This distinction between intention and activity also permeates many aspects of criminal law, and for instance distinguishes between murder and manslaughter. Intention, and especially long-term planning and willingly engaging in criminal offences are at least an aggravating condition of crime. On the other hand, accidents, incidents, 'on the spur of the moment', or emotionally defined acts, and similarly non-planned actions are partly excusable and hence less serious. This is, by definition, especially the case in spontaneous everyday interaction.

Note that intention denials, as we may call them, are strategically very effective, since the accuser has few ways to actually prove negative intentions. This is particularly also the case in discrimination trials, where it is

often hard to prove that the negative action was not committed because of other, acceptable reasons. For instance, a newspaper may repeatedly and prominently publish reports about minority crime, but may at the same time defend such practices by claiming to publish 'the truth', and thus deny prejudiced opinions about minority crime and hence deny spreading such prejudices with the intention of discrediting minorities or inciting racial hatred. This is among the most classical cases of media racism (van Dijk, 1991).

On the other hand, although intentionally committed crimes are usually evaluated as more serious, people are assumed to have control over their activities, and hence also over their intentions. This may mean, for instance, that people are responsible for the *possible* consequences of their actions, even when such consequences may not have been the actual purpose of such actions. That is, if it can be shown that people could have known that their acts have negative consequences, then they are at least partially responsible for such consequences, especially if these would not have occurred without their actions. For instance, a politician who gives an interview that criticizes welfare cheating by minorities, knows that such allegations will be published, and that such a publication may further confirm negative prejudices among the media audience. Such a politician may deny discriminatory intent or purpose, and claim that he or she only wanted to 'tell the truth'.

In other words, we now have the following types of denials:

1. act-denial (I did not do/say that at all);
2. control-denial (I did not do/say that on purpose', 'It was an accident');
3. intention-denial (I did not mean that', 'You got me wrong');
4. goal-denial ('I did not do/say that, in order to .. .').

In the last case, there is also a denial of responsibility: if there were negative consequences, I did not have control over them. We have already suggested that especially the media routinely deny responsibility for what the audience may do with media contents. Theoretically, legally and morally, these are the more difficult dimensions of the denial of racism. In most cases, one would need repeated acts/texts of the same kind, in different situations, and occasional expressions of plans, intentions or goals in order to 'prove' negative intentions or goals. It is not surprising, therefore, that also in discrimination lawsuits, intentions may sometimes be declared irrelevant, and that people are judged only by the direct or even indirect (statistical) consequences of their actions.

Another form of denial is the class of acts that may be categorized as *mitigations*, such as downtoning, minimizing or using euphemisms when describing one's negative actions: 'I did not threaten him, but gave him friendly advice', 'I did not insult her, but told her my honest opinion', etc. Mitigation strategies are particularly important in social situations where the relevant norms are rather strong. Thus, we may assume that the more stringent the norm against discrimination and racism, the more people will tend to have recourse to denials and hence also to mitigations.

Indeed, the very notion of 'racism' may become virtually taboo in accusatory contexts because of its strong negative connotations. If used at all in public discourse, for instance in the media, it will typically be enclosed by quotes or accompanied by doubt or distance markers such as 'alleged', signalling that this is a, possibly unwarranted if not preposterous, accusation, e.g. by minorities themselves or by (other) anti-racists. Acts in which racism is undeniable tend to be described in terms of 'discrimination', 'prejudice', 'stereotypes', 'bias', 'racial motivation', but not as 'racist'. Generally, the notions of 'racism' and 'racist' in European and US public discourse are reserved for *others*, for instance, extremist, right-wing, fringe groups and parties outside of the consensus. Also, the notion of 'racism' may be used to describe racism abroad or in the past, as is the case for apartheid in South Africa or the period of slavery, reconstruction and segregation in the USA. As a general term denoting a whole system of racial or ethnic inequality, exclusion or oppression in western societies, racism is used primarily by minority groups or other anti-racists. In other words, the use of euphemisms presupposes the denial of systemic racism of the ingroup or dominant society. This is also the case in much scholarly discourse about ethnic relations (Essed, 1987).

Note that this denial of racism should partly be attributed to the fact that the concept of racism is (still) largely understood in the classical, ideological sense, of seeing other ethnic or racial groups as being inferior, or as overt, official, institutional practices, as is the case for apartheid (Miles, 1989). The more 'modern', subtle and indirect forms of ethnic or racial inequality, and especially the 'racism', or rather 'ethnicism' based on constructions of cultural difference and incompatibility, is seldom characterized as 'racism', but at most as xenophobia, and more often than not, as legitimate cultural self-defence (Barker, 1981; Dovidio and Gaertner, 1986).

Besides denial proper, there are also a number of cognitive and social strategies that are more or less closely related to denials. The first is *justification*, as we already saw in the case of the newspaper justifying special attention for minority crime by referring to the 'truth' or the 'right to know' of its readers. Similarly, in everyday conversations, people may justify a negative act or discourse relative to a minority group member by justifying it as an act of legitimate defence, or by detailing that the other person was indeed guilty and, therefore, deserved a negative reaction. In other words, in this case, the act is not denied, but it is denied that it was negative, and explicitly asserted that it was justified (for details, see Antaki, 1988; Scott and Lyman, 1968; Tedeschi and Reiss, 1981).

Similarly, negative acts may be acknowledged as such, but at the same time *excused* (Cody and McLaughlin, 1988). In this case, at least part of the blame may be put on special circumstances, or rather on others. Owners of clubs may admit to having discriminated against blacks by not letting them in, but may make an appeal to the circumstance that already so many other blacks were in the club. The same is routinely the case in immigration debates at a higher political level: we do not let in more immigrants or

refugees, in order to avoid aggravating the ethnic tensions in the inner cities. The latter case may in fact be presented as a justification and not as an excuse, because the act of refusing entry is not admitted to be a negative act, but as a constitutional privilege of states.

Stronger excuse strategies are alleging *provocation* and *blaming the victim*. Thus, the police may feel justified to act harshly against young black males, as is the case in many European and US cities, because of alleged provocations, drug offences, or other stereotypically assigned negative actions of young blacks. Government policies, again both in Europe and the US, routinely justify or excuse 'tough' measures against minorities by claiming that they are themselves to blame: lack of integration, failing to learn the language, lacking motivation to find a job and cultural deviance, are among the grounds for such blaming. Unemployment, lacking success in education, miserable housing and welfare dependence, among other things, are thus routinely attributed to negative characteristics of the 'victims' themselves. Note that such stronger strategies usually imply a denial of own failing policies.

Finally, the strongest form of denial is *reversal*: 'We are not guilty of negative action, *they are*' and 'We are not the racists, *they are the real racists*.' This kind of reversal is the stock-in-trade of the radical Right, although less extreme versions also occur in more moderate anti-racism (Murray, 1986). The British tabloids, as we see later, thus tend to accuse the anti-racists of being intolerant busybodies, and the real racists. Similarly, the French Front National typically accuses those who are not against immigration of non-Europeans as engaging in 'anti-French racism'. More generally, anti-racists tend to be represented as the ones who are intolerant, while lightly accusing innocent and well-meaning citizens (i.e. us) of racism. We see that reversals are no longer forms of social defence, but part of a strategy of (counter-)attack.

#### SOCIOCULTURAL AND POLITICAL FUNCTIONS

Although usually manifesting itself, at the micro-level of social organization, in everyday conversation and interpersonal communication, the denial of racism not only has individual functions. We have seen that people deny, mitigate, justify or excuse negative acts towards minorities in order to emphasize their compliance with the law or with norms and to stress their role as competent, decent citizens. That is, even in interpersonal situations, the moral dimension of denial has social presuppositions. It does not make sense to deny racist acts as a moral or legal transgression if the group or society as a whole agrees with you, as is/was the case during official apartheid policies in South Africa, or during the reconstruction and segregation period in US history. Indeed, more generally, it may be said that when racism ethnicism or ethnocentrism are openly advocated or legitimated by the elites and the leading institutions of society, the less we should find denials, let alone excuses of racist acts and discourse.



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However, in present-day European and US societies, where discrimination and racism are officially banned, and norms have developed that do not tolerate blatant expressions of outgroup hate, denial takes a much more prominent role in discourse on ethnic affairs. We suggested that this is not only true at the personal level. Also groups, institutions or organizations as a whole, at a meso- or macro-level of social organization, may engage in such strategies of denial. In that case, denials may take the form of a shared opinion, as a consensus about the ethnic situation. For instance, since discrimination and racism are legally and morally prohibited, most western countries share the official belief that *therefore* discrimination and racism no longer exist as a structural characteristic of society or the state. If discrimination or prejudice still exist, it is treated as an incident, as a deviation, as something that should be attributed to, and punished at the individual level. In other words, institutional or systemic racism is denied.

Hence, positive self-presentation and face-keeping are not limited to individuals, but also, if not more strongly, characterizes the more public discourse of institutions and organizations. Universities in the USA routinely print on their letterhead that they are 'Equal Opportunity Employers', not only because such employment practices are the law, but also because this is good PR. Organizations, no more than individuals, do not want to be known as racist among their personnel, among their customers or among the public at large. Moreover, ethnic and racial tolerance, and even affirmative action, are symbols of social progress and modernity, which by association may be related to the quality of the products or services of an organization. This is of course most literally true when organizations employ highly talented members from minority groups who may enhance quality of products and especially services for a growing clientele of minorities. Self-interest in this case may well be consistent with ideologies of social policy.

However, social policies may conflict with organizational or business interests and ideologies, for instance in more consequential forms of affirmative action such as quota. In this case, other values, such as the freedom of enterprise, and especially economic competitiveness, are posed against the values that underly social policy. Refusing quotas, therefore, is most emphatically denied to be an expression of discrimination or racism, for instance, because it is seen as quality-degrading instead of equality-enhancing and to be an unacceptable form of group-favouring. Thus, ultimately, also in state or business organizations, the acceptance of affirmative action, will move within strict boundaries defined by the interests and the power of the (white) elites that control them.

The social functions of the institutional denial of racism are obvious. If liberal democracies in Europe and the US have increasingly adopted laws and norms that presuppose or guarantee equality, freedom, if not brother- or sisterhood, for all, the ethnic or racial inequalities implied by discrimination or racism would be inconsistent with official ideologies. Instead of recognizing such 'imperfection', it is more expedient to deny such funda-

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mental inconsistency, or at least to explain it away as incidental and individual, to blame it on the victims, or to characterize it as a temporary phenomenon of transition, for instance for new immigrants.

If racism is defined as a system of racial or ethnic dominance, it is likely that the denial of racism also has a prominent role in the very reproduction of racism. This is indeed the case. Dominance and inequality provoke resistance. However, when the dominant consensus is that there is no racism, minority groups and their protests or other forms of resistance have a very hard time to be taken seriously (Essed, 1991). In systems of apartheid and officially sanctioned segregation, things are clear-cut, and the power difference so blatant that the enemy is well defined, and resistance well focused.

However, in modern, increasingly pluralist societies that have laws and even prevalent norms against (blatant) prejudice, discrimination and racism, this is much less the case. If tolerance is promoted as a national myth, as is the case for the Netherlands, it is much more difficult for minority groups to challenge remaining inequalities, to take unified action and to gain credibility and support among the (white) dominant group. Indeed, they may be seen as oversensitive, exaggerating or overdemanding. The more flexible the system of inequality, the more difficult it is to fight it.

The white consensus that denies the prevalence of racism thus is a very powerful element in its reproduction, especially since successful resistance requires public attention, media coverage and at least partial recognition of grievances. If leading politicians and the media refuse to acknowledge that there is a serious problem, there will be no public debate, no change of public opinion and hence no change in the system of power relations. Change in that case can only be put on the agenda by actively creating the kind of public 'problems' that can no longer be overlooked, such as demonstrations or even 'riots'. Other serious problems, such as high minority unemployment or educational 'underachievement', may well be recognized by the elites, but it is routine to deny that they have anything to do with racism. 'Occasional, unintentional discrimination' is merely taken as one, marginal element in such social problems.

We see that the social functions of the denial of racism are closely associated with the political ones. Decision-making, agenda-setting and public opinion management, both nationally and locally, favour a definition of the ethnic or racial situation in which the element of 'racism' is carefully eliminated, simply because it implies that *we* are the real problem, and not *they*. Immigration, employment, education or social policies, thus, need to be founded on an ideology that skilfully combines humanitarian values and self-interest.

By selectively attributing racism to the extreme Right, it is both denied as being a characteristic of the own ingroup of moderate white citizens, and at the same time better manageable, for instance by occasionally prosecuting the more overt right-wing racists. Recognizing that many subtle forms of everyday racism are rife throughout society would be lending

support to a form of sociopolitical analysis that is no longer manageable: if it is true, how can it be changed? After all, we already have laws against discrimination, and if these do not work properly, what else can we do to change the 'mentality' of the people? The result of such complex underlying structures of political decision-making is that overall denial is flexibly coupled with incidental admissions of the more blatant 'exceptions' to the rule.

We see that the denial of racism is not only part of a strategy of personal, institutional or social impression management and ideological self-defence, it also is a form of sociopolitical management. It helps control resistance, and at the same time makes political problems of an ethnically or racially pluralist society more manageable. In sum, denial is a major management strategy.

Finally, we may ask whether the denial of racism also has more specific cultural functions. Obviously, since different groups and their respective cultures are involved, and racism also requires definition in terms of cultural hegemony, its denial should also have cultural dimensions. One such dimension is the combination of denying racism or ethnocentrism with the self-affirmation of tolerance as a feature of contemporary 'western' culture. In the same way as democracy, technology, Christianity and western values are thus, at least implicitly, presented in textbooks, political discourse and the media, as superior to other cultures, also western 'tolerance' is contrasted with, for example, intolerant cultures, at present especially with Muslim fundamentalism (Said, 1981).

Western discourse during the Rushdie affair is a clear case in point. Public debate during this affair focused not only on freedom of speech and the arts, but at the same time on stereotypes about the fundamentalist if not 'fanatical' elements of Muslim culture. That anti-Arab racism played a prominent role in this debate was emphatically denied, e.g. by claiming universality of western values. In other words, in the same way as white people may deny racism and at the same time present themselves as tolerant citizens, western culture as a whole may deny racism or ethnocentrism, and emphasize tolerance.

That such cultural claims are closely linked with the management of world politics, as was also shown during the Gulf War, hardly needs to be spelled out. The same is true, more generally, in the management of the relations between the North and the South, e.g. through strategies of denying neo-colonialism or imperialism, self-interest in international aid and by affirming the 'leading' role of the western world. In sum, the western denial of racism and ethnocentrism, and its social, political and cultural implications, plays a role from the level of interpersonal relations, to the global level of intercultural and international relations. At all levels, such denial functions essentially to manage resistance, dissent and opposition and hence as a strategy in the reproduction of hegemony (Lauren, 1988).

## CONVERSATION

Everyday conversation is at the heart of social life. Whether in informal situations, with family members or friends, or on the job with colleagues or clients or within a multitude of institutions, informal talk constitutes a crucial mode of social interaction. At the same time, conversations are a major conduit of social 'information-processing', and provide the context for the expression and persuasive conveyance of shared knowledge and beliefs.

In ethnically mixed societies, minority groups and ethnic relations are a major topic of everyday conversation. Whether through direct personal experience, or indirectly through the mass media, white people in Europe and North America learn about minorities or immigrants, formulate their own opinions and thus informally reproduce—and occasionally challenge—the dominant consensus on ethnic affairs through informal everyday talk.

Our extensive discourse analytical research into the nature of such everyday talk about ethnic affairs, based on some 170 interviews conducted in the Netherlands and California, shows that such informal talk has a number of rather consistent properties (van Dijk, 1984, 1987a):

1. Topics are selected from a rather small range of subjects, and focus on sociocultural differences, deviance and competition. Most topics explicitly or implicitly deal with interpersonal, social, cultural or economic 'threats' of the dominant white group, society or culture.
2. Story-telling is not, as would be usual, focused on entertaining, but takes place within an argumentative framework. Stories serve as the strong, while personally experienced, premises of a generally negative conclusion, such as 'We are not used to that here', 'They should learn the language' or 'The government should do something about that.'
3. Style, rhetoric and conversational interaction generally denote critical distance, if not negative attitudes towards minorities or immigration. However, current norms of tolerance control expressions of evaluations in such a way that discourse with strangers (such as interviewers) is generally rather mitigated. Strong verbal aggression tends to be avoided.
4. Overall, speakers follow a double strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

It is within this latter strategy also that disclaimers, such as 'I have nothing against Arabs, *but* . . .' have their specific functions (Scott and Lyman, 1968). Such a denial may be called 'apparent', because the denial is not supported by evidence that the speaker does not have anything against 'them'. On the contrary, the denial often serves as the face-keeping move introducing a generally negative assertion, following the invariable *but*, sometimes stressed, as in the following example from a Dutch woman:

- (1) uhh ... how they are and that is mostly just fine, people have their own religion have their own way of life, and I have *absolutely* nothing

against that, *but*, it *is* a fact that if their way of life begins to differ from mine to an *extent* that ..

Talking about the main topic of cultural difference, the denial here focuses on relative tolerance for such cultural differences, which, however, is clearly constrained. The differences should not be too great. So, on the one hand, the woman follows the norm of tolerance, but on the other hand, she feels justified to reject others when they 'go too far'. In other words, the denial here presupposes a form of limited social acceptance.

Speakers who are more aware of discrimination and racism, as is the case in California, are even more explicit about the possible inferences of their talk:

- (2) It sounds prejudiced, but I think if students only use English ..

The use of English, a prominent topic for 'ethnic' conversations in the USA, may be required for many practical reasons, but the speaker realizes that whatever the good arguments he or she may have, it may be heard as a form of prejudice against immigrants. Of course the use of 'It sounds' implies that the speaker does not think he is really prejudiced.

One major form of denial in everyday conversation is the denial of discrimination. Indeed, as also happens in the Right-wing media (see below), we also find reversal in this case: we are the real victims of immigration and minorities. Here are some of the ways people in Amsterdam formulate their denials:

- (3) Yes, they have exploited them, that's what they say at least, you know, but well, I don't believe that either. ...
- (4) Big cars, they are better off than we are. If anybody is being discriminated against, our children are. That's what I make of it.
- (5) And the only thing that came from her mouth was I am being discriminated against and the Dutch all have good housing, well it is a big lie, it is not true.
- (6) And they say that they are being dismi discri discriminated against. That is not true.
- (7) Listen, they always say that foreigners are being discriminated against here. No, *we* are being discriminated against. It is exactly the reverse.

In all these situations, the speakers talk about what they see as threats or lies by immigrants: a murder in (3), cheating on welfare in (4), a radio programme where a black woman says she is discriminated against in (5), and neighbourhood services in (6) and (7). In conversations such reversals may typically be heard in working-class neighbourhoods where crime is attributed to minorities, or where alleged favouritism (e.g. in housing) is resented. Poor whites thus feel that they are victims of inadequate social and urban policies, but instead of blaming the authorities or the politicians, they tend to blame the newcomers who, in their eyes, are so closely related to the changing, i.e. deteriorating, life in the inner city. And if *they* are defined as those who are responsible, such a role is inconsistent with the claim that *they* are discriminated against (Phizacklea and Miles, 1979).

Note that this consensus is not universal. Negative behaviour may be observed, but without generalization and with relevant comparisons to Dutch youths:

- (8) And that was also, well I am sorry, but they were foreigners, they were apparently Moroccans who did that. But God, all young people are aggressive, whether it is Turkish youth, or Dutch youth, or Surinamese youth, is aggressive. Particularly because of discrimination uhh that we have here . . .

Here discrimination is not reversed, and the young immigrants are represented as victims of discrimination, which is used to explain and hence to excuse some of their 'aggressiveness'. Such talk, however, is rather exceptional.

#### THE PRESS

Many of the 'ethnic events' people talk about in everyday life are not known from personal experiences, but from the media. At least until recently, in many parts of Western Europe and even in some regions of North America, most white people had few face-to-face dealings with members of minority groups. Arguments in everyday talk, thus, may be about crime or cultural differences they read about in the press, and such reports are taken as 'proof' of the negative attitudes the speakers have about minorities.

Our analyses of thousands of reports in the press in Britain and the Netherlands (van Dijk, 1991), largely confirm the common-sense interpretations of the readers: a topical analysis shows that crime, cultural differences, violence (riots), social welfare and problematic immigration are among the major recurrent topics of ethnic affairs reporting. In other words, there are marked parallels between topics of talk and media topics.

Overall, with some changes over the last decade, the dominant picture of minorities and immigrants is that of *problems* (Hartmann and Husband, 1974). Thus the conservative and right-wing press tends to focus on the problems minorities and immigrants are seen to create (in housing, schooling, unemployment, crime, etc.), whereas the more liberal press (also) focuses on the problems minorities have (poverty, discrimination), but which *we* (white liberals) do something about. On the other hand, many topics that are routine in the coverage of white people, groups or institutions tend to be ignored, such as their contribution to the economy, political organization, culture and in general all topics that characterize the everyday lives of minorities, and their own, active contributions to the society as a whole. Thus, in many respects, except when involved in conflicts or problems, minorities tend to be 'denied' by the press (Boskin, 1980).

Practices of newsgathering as well as patterns of quotation also show that minorities and their institutions have literally little to say in the press. First of all, especially in Europe, there are virtually no minority journalists, so

that the perspective, inside knowledge and experience, prevailing attitudes and necessary sources of journalists tend to be all-white, as are also the government agencies, police and other institutions that are the main sources of news in the press (van Dijk, 1988a, 1988b). Even on ethnic events minority spokespersons are less quoted, less credibly quoted, and if they are quoted their opinions are often 'balanced' by the more 'neutral' comments of white spokespersons. Especially on delicate topics, such as discrimination, prejudice and racism, minority representatives or experts are very seldom heard in a credible, authoritative way. If at all, such quotes are often presented as unwarranted or even ridiculous accusations.

It is at this point where the overall strategy of denial has one of its discursive manifestations in press reports. Of course, as may be expected, there is a difference between liberal, conservative and right-wing newspapers in this respect. Note, however, that there are virtually no explicitly anti-racist newspapers in Europe and North America. The official norm, even on the Right, is that 'we are all against racism', and the overall message is, therefore, that serious accusations of racism are a figment of the imagination.

Liberal newspapers, however, do pay attention to stories of explicit discrimination, e.g. in employment (though *rarely* in their own newsrooms or news reports), whereas right-wing extremism is usually dealt with in critical terms, although such coverage may focus on violent or otherwise newsworthy incidents rather than on racist attitudes per se. By such means ethnic or racial inequality is redefined as marginal, that is, as individualized or outside the consensus. Thus, the Dutch liberal press extensively reports cases (accusations) of discrimination, and the same is true in the USA. In the right-wing press, discrimination is also covered, but from a different perspective. Here, it is usually covered as a preposterous accusation, preferably against 'ordinary' people, or embedded in explanations or excuses (the act was provoked).

Whereas discrimination gets rather wide attention in the press, racism does not. Indeed, discrimination is seldom qualified as a manifestation of racism. One of the reasons is that racism is still often understood as an ideology of white supremacy, or as the kind of practices of the extreme Right. Since the large majority of the press does not identify with the extreme Right, any qualification of everyday discriminatory practices as 'racism' is resolutely rejected.

For large sections of the press, only anti-racists see such everyday racism as racism, which results in the marginalization of anti-racists as a radical, 'loony' group. For much of the press, at least in Britain, the real enemies, therefore, are the anti-racists: they are intolerant, anti-British, busybodies, who see racism everywhere, even in 'innocent' children's books, and even in the press.

It is not surprising, therefore, that reports on general aspects of racism in one's own society or group tend to be rare, even in the liberal press. Anti-racist writers, researchers or action groups have less access to the media, and their activities or opinions tend to be more or less harshly scorned, if

not ridiculed. For the right-wing press, moreover, they are the real source of the 'problems' attributed to a multicultural society, because they not only attack venerable institutions (such as the police, government or business), but also provide a competing but fully incompatible definition of the ethnic situation. It is this symbolic competition for the definition of the situation and the intellectual struggle over the definition of society's morals, that pitches the right-wing press against left-wing, anti-racist intellectuals, teachers, writers and action groups.

Let us examine in more detail how exactly the press engages in this denial of racism. Most of our examples are taken from the British press, but it would not be difficult to find similar examples in the Dutch, German and French press. Because of its long history of slavery and segregation, the notion of white racism is more broadly accepted in the USA, even when today's prevailing ideology is that, now minorities have equal rights, racism is largely a thing of the past.

#### *Racism and the press*

The denial of racism in and by the press is of course most vehement when the press itself is the target of accusations. Reflecting similar reactions by other editors of Dutch newspapers to our own research on racism in the press, the Editor-in-Chief of a major elite weekly, *Intermediar*, catering especially for social scientists and the business community, writes the following in a letter:

- (9) In particular, what you state about the coverage of minorities remains unproven and an unacceptable caricature of reality. Your thesis 'that the tendency of most reports is that ethnic minorities cause problems for us' is in my opinion not only not proven, but simply incorrect (*translated from the Dutch*).

This reaction was inspired by a brief summary of mostly international research on the representation of minorities in the press. The Editor's denial is not based on (other) research, but simply stated as a 'fact'. It is not surprising that the article, on recent news research, was not published despite my having been initially invited to write such a piece.

Other editors take an even more furious stand, and challenge the very academic credentials of the researcher and the university, as is the case by the Editor of the major conservative popular daily in the Netherlands, *De Telegraaf*, well known for its biased reporting on minorities, immigrants and refugees:

- (10) Your so-called scientific research does not in any sense prove your slanderous insinuations regarding the contents of our newspaper, is completely irrelevant and raises doubt about the prevailing norms of scientific research and social prudence at the University of Amsterdam (*translated from the Dutch*).

We see that whatever 'proof' may be brought in one's painstaking analyses of news reports, the reaction is one of flat denial and counter-attack by discrediting the researcher. Examples like these may be multi-



plied at random. No newspaper, including (or especially) the more liberal ones, will accept even a moderate charge of being biased, while allegations of racism are rejected violently. Recall that these newspapers, especially in Europe, generally employ no, or only one or two token, minority journalists.

With such an editorial attitude towards racism, there is a general reluctance to identify racist events as such in society at large. Let us examine the principal modes of such denials in the press. Examples are taken from the British press coverage of ethnic affairs in 1985 (for analysis of other properties of these examples, see van Dijk, 1991). Brief summaries of the context of each fragment of news discourse are given between parentheses.

#### *Positive self-presentation*

The semantic basis of denial is 'truth' as the writer sees it. The denial of racism in the press, therefore, presupposes that the journalist or columnist believes that his or her own group or country is essentially 'tolerant' towards minorities or immigrants. Positive self-presentation, thus, is an important move in journalistic discourse, and should be seen as the argumentative denial of the accusations of anti-racists:

- (11) [Handsworth] Contrary to much doctrine, and acknowledging a small malevolent fascist fringe, this is a remarkably tolerant society. But tolerance would be stretched were it to be seen that enforcement of law adopted the principle of reverse discrimination (*Daily Telegraph*, Editorial, 11 September).
- (12) [Racial attacks and policing] If the ordinary British taste for decency and tolerance is to come through, it will need positive and unmistakable action (*Daily Telegraph*, Editorial, 13 August).
- (13) [Racial attacks against Asians] . . . Britain's record for absorbing people from different backgrounds, peacefully and with tolerance, is second to none. The descendants of Irish and Jewish immigrants will testify to that. It would be tragic to see that splendid reputation tarnished now (*Sun*, Editorial, 14 August).
- (14) [Immigration] Our traditions of fairness and tolerance are being exploited by every terrorist, crook, screwball and scrounger who wants a free ride at our expense. . . . Then there are the criminals who sneak in as political refugees or as family members visiting a distant relative (*Mail*, 28 November).
- (15) We have racism too—and that is what is behind the plot. It is not white racism. It is black racism. . . . But who is there to protect the white majority? . . . Our tolerance is our strength, but we will not allow anyone to turn it into our weakness. (*Sun*, 24 October).

These examples not only assert or presuppose white British 'tolerance', but at the same time define its boundaries. Tolerance might be interpreted as a position of weakness and, therefore, it should not be 'stretched' too far, lest 'every terrorist', 'criminal' or other immigrant, takes advantage of it. Affirmative action or liberal immigration laws, thus, can only be seen as a form of reverse discrimination, and hence as a form of self-destruction of

white Britain. Ironically, therefore, these examples are self-defeating because of their internal contradictions. It is not tolerance per se that is aimed at, but rather the limitations preventing its 'excesses'. Note that in example (15) positive self-presentation is at the same time combined with the well-known move of reversal. 'They are the real racists', 'We are the real victims.' We shall come back to such reversal moves below.

#### *Denial and counter-attack*

Having constructed a positive self-image of white Britain, the conservative and tabloid press especially engages in attacks against those who hold a different view, at the same time defending those who agree with its position, as was the case during the notorious Honeyford affair (Honeyford was headmaster of a Bradford school who was suspended, then reinstated and finally let go with a golden handshake, after having written articles on multicultural education which most of the parents of his mostly Asian students found racist). The attacks on the anti-racists often embody denials of racism:

- (16) [Reaction of 'race lobby' against Honeyford] Why is it that this lobby have chosen to persecute this man. . . . It is not because he is a racist; it is precisely because he is not a racist, yet has dared to challenge the attitudes, behaviour and approach of the ethnic minority professionals (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 September).
- (17) [Honeyford and other cases] Nobody is less able to face the truth than the hysterical 'anti-racist' brigade. Their intolerance is such that they try to silence or sack anyone who doesn't toe their party-line (*Sun*, 23 October, column by John Vincent).
- (18) [Honeyford] For speaking commonsense he's been vilified; for being courageous he's been damned, for refusing to concede defeat his enemies can't forgive him. . . . I have interviewed him and I am utterly convinced that he hasn't an ounce of racism in his entire being (*Mail*, 18 September, column by Lynda Lee-Potter).
- (19) [Honeyford quits] Now we know who the true racists are (*Sun* Editorial, 30 November).

These examples illustrate several strategic moves in the press campaign against anti-racists. First, as we have seen above, denial is closely linked to the presupposition of 'truth': Honeyford is presented as defending the 'truth', namely the failure and the anti-British nature of multiculturalism. Secondly, consequent denials often lead to the strategic move of reversal: *we* are not the racists, *they* are the 'true racists'. This reversal also implies, thirdly, a reversal of the charges: Honeyford, and those who sympathize with him, are the victims, not his Asian students and their parents. Consequently, the anti-racists are the enemy: *they are* the ones who persecute innocent, ordinary British citizens, *they* are the ones who are intolerant. Therefore, victims who resist their attackers may be defined as folk heroes, who 'dare' the 'anti-racist brigade'.

Note also, in example (17), that the 'truth', as the supporters of Honey-

ford see it, is self-evident, and based on common sense. Truth and common sense are closely related notions in such counter-attacks, and reflect the power of the consensus, as well as the mobilization of popular support by 'ordinary' (white) British people. Apart from marginalizing Asian parents and other anti-racists by locating them outside of the consensus, and beyond the community of ordinary people like 'us', such appeals to common sense also have powerful ideological implications: self-evident truth is seen as 'natural', and hence the position of the others as 'unnatural' or even as 'crazy'. The anti-racist Left, therefore, is often called 'crazy' or 'loony' in the right-wing British press.

### *Moral blackmail*

One element that was very prominent in the Honeyford affair, as well as in similar cases, was the pretence of censorship: the anti-racists not only ignore the 'truth' about multicultural society, they also prevent others (us) from telling the truth. Repeatedly, thus, journalists and columnists argue that this 'taboo' and this 'censorship' must be broken in order to be able to tell the 'truth', as was the case after the disturbances in Tottenham:

(20) [Tottenham] The time has come to state the truth without cant and without hypocrisy ... the strength to face the facts without being silenced by the fear of being called racist (*Mail*, 9 October, column by Lynda Lee-Potter).

Such examples also show that the authors feel morally blackmailed, while at the same time realizing that to 'state the truth', meaning 'to say negative things about minorities', may well be against the prevalent norms of tolerance and understanding. Clamouring for the 'truth', thus, expresses a dilemma, even if the dilemma is only apparent: the apparent dilemma is a rhetorical strategy to accuse the opponent of censorship or blackmail, not the result of moral soul-searching and a difficult decision. After all, the same newspapers extensively *do* write negative things about young blacks, and never hesitate to write what they see as the 'truth'. Nobody 'silences' them, and the taboo is only imaginary. On the contrary, the right-wing press in Britain reaches many millions of readers.

Thus, this strategic play of denial and reversal at the same time involves the construction of social roles in the world of ethnic strife, such as allies and enemies, victims, heroes and oppressors. In many respects, such discourse mimics the discourse of anti-racists by simply reverting the major roles: victims become oppressors, those who are in power become victims.

### *Subtle denials*

Denials are not always explicit. There are many ways to express doubt, distance or non-acceptance of statements or accusations by others. When the official Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) in 1985 published a report on discrimination in the UK, outright denial of the facts would hardly be credible. Other discursive means, such as quotation marks, and

the use of words like 'claim' or 'allege', presupposing doubt on the part of the writer, may be employed in accounting for the facts, as is the case in the following editorial from the *Daily Telegraph*:

- (21) In its report which follows a detailed review of the operation of the 1976 Race Relations Act, the Commission claims that ethnic minorities continue to suffer high levels of discrimination and disadvantage (*Daily Telegraph*, 1 August).

Such linguistic tricks do not go unnoticed, as we may see in the following reaction to this passage in a letter from Peter Newsam, then Director of the CRE.

- (22) Of the Commission you say 'it claims that ethnic minorities continue to suffer high levels of discrimination and disadvantage'. This is like saying that someone 'claims' that July was wet. It was. And it is also a fact supported by the weight of independent research evidence that discrimination on racial grounds, in employment, housing and services, remains at a disconcertingly high level (*Daily Telegraph*, 7 August).

Denials, thus, may be subtly conveyed by expressing doubt or distance. Therefore, the very notion of 'racism' usually appears between quotation marks, especially also in the headlines. Such scare quotes are not merely a journalistic device of reporting opinions or controversial points of view. If that were the case, also the opinions with which the newspaper happens to agree would have to be put between quotes, which is not always the case. Rather, apart from signalling journalistic doubt and distance, the quotes also connote 'unfounded accusation'. The use of quotes around the notion of 'racism' has become so much routine, that even in cases where the police or the courts themselves established that racism was involved in a particular case, the conservative press may maintain the quotes out of sheer habit.

### *Mitigation*

Our conceptual analysis of denial already showed that denial may also be implied by various forms of mitigation, such as downtoning, using euphemisms or other circumlocutions that minimize the act itself or the responsibility of the accused. In the same Editorial of the *Daily Telegraph* we quoted above, we find the following statement:

- (23) [CRE report] No one would deny the fragile nature of race relations in Britain today or that there is misunderstanding and distrust between parts of the community (*Daily Telegraph*, Editorial, 1 August).

Thus, instead of inequality or racism, race relations are assumed to be 'fragile', whereas 'misunderstanding and distrust' is also characteristic of these relations. Interestingly, this passage also explicitly denies the prevalence of denials and, therefore, might be read as a concession: there *are* problems. However, the way this concession is rhetorically presented by way of various forms of mitigation, suggests, in the context of the rest of

the same Editorial, that the concession is apparent. Such apparent concessions are another major form of disclaimer in discourse about ethnic relations, as we also have them in statements like: 'There are also intelligent blacks, but . . .', or 'I know that minorities sometimes have problems, but . . .'. Note also that in the example from the *Daily Telegraph* the mitigation not only appears in the use of euphemisms, but also in the *redistribution of responsibility*, and hence in the denial of blame. Not we (whites) are mainly responsible for the tensions between the communities, but everybody is, as is suggested by the use of the impersonal existential phrase: 'There is misunderstanding . . .'. Apparently, one effective move of denial is to either dispute responsible agency, or to conceal agency.

#### *Defence and offence*

On the other hand, in its attacks against the anti-racists, the right-wing press is not always that subtle. On the contrary, they may engage precisely in the 'diatribes' they direct at their opponents:

- (24) [Anti-fascist rally] The evening combined emotive reminders of the rise of Nazism with diatribes against racial discrimination and prejudice today (*Daily Telegraph*, 1 October).
- (25) [Black sections] In the more ideologically-blinkered sections of his [Kinnock's] party . . . they seem to gain pleasure from identifying all difficulties experienced by immigrant groups, particularly Afro-Caribbeans, as the result of racism . . . (*Daily Telegraph*, Editorial, 14 September).
- (26) [Worker accused of racism] . . . The really alarming thing is that some of these pocket Hitlers of local government are moving into national politics. It's time we set about exposing their antics while we can. Forewarned is forearmed (*Mail*, Editorial, 26 October).

These examples further illustrate that denial of discrimination, prejudice and racism is not merely a form of self-defence or positive self-presentation. Rather, it is at the same time an element of attack against what they define as 'ideologically blinkered' opponents, as we also have seen in the move of reversal in other examples. Anti-racism is associated with the 'loony left', and attacking it therefore also has important ideological and political implications, and not just moral ones.

'Difficulties' of the Afro-Caribbean community may be presupposed, though not spelled out forcefully and in detail, but such presuppositions rather take the form of an apparent concession. That is, whatever the causes of these 'difficulties', as they are euphemistically called, they can not be the result of racism. Implicitly, by attributing 'pleasure' to those who explain the situation of the blacks, the newspaper also suggests that the Left has an interest in such explanations and, therefore, even welcomes racism. This strategy is familiar in many other attacks against anti-racists: 'If there were no racism, they would invent it'. It hardly needs to be spelled out that such a claim again implies a denial of racism.

The amalgamation of comparisons and metaphors used in these attacks

is quite interesting. That is, in one example an ironic reference is made to the 'emotive reminders' of Nazism, and in another these same opponents of Nazism are qualified as 'pocket Hitlers'. Yet, this apparent inconsistency in sociopolitical labelling has a very precise function. By referring to their opponents in terms of 'pocket Hitlers' the newspapers obviously distance themselves from the fascist opinions and practices that are often part of the more radical accusations against the Right. At the same time, by way of the usual reversal, they categorize their opponents precisely in terms of their own accusations, and thus put them in a role these opponents most clearly would abhor.

Thus, the anti-racist Left is associated with fascist practices, ideological blinkers and antics. Apart from their anti-racist stance, it is, however, their (modest) political influence which particularly enrages the right-wing press—although virtually powerless at the national level, and even within their own (Labour) party, some of the anti-racists have made it into local councils, and therefore control (some) money, funding and other forms of political influence. That is, they have at least some counter-power, and it is this power and its underlying ideology that is challenged by a press which itself controls the news supply of millions of readers. What the denial of racism and the concomitant attacks against the anti-racists in education or politics is all about, therefore, is a struggle over the definition of the ethnic situation. Thus, their ideological and political opponents are seen as symbolic competitors in the realm of moral influence. Whether directed at a headmaster or against other ordinary white British or not, what the right-wing press is particularly concerned about is its own image: by attacking the anti-racists, it is in fact defending itself.

#### PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE

In close symbiosis with the mass media, politics plays a prominent role in the definition of the ethnic situation. In Western Europe, decision-making by the administration and the bureaucracy, and parliamentary debates in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly deal with ethnic affairs, immigration and refugees. Persistent social inequalities, unemployment, affirmative action, educational 'disadvantage', popular resentment against immigration and the arrival of 'waves' of new refugees from the South, are among the major topics on the political agenda.

Our analysis of elite discourse, therefore, also needs to pay attention to parliamentary discourse, also because different ideologies, opinions and interests may openly clash there, especially also about 'delicate' issues such as minorities and immigration. Therefore, we examined some major debates on these topics in the parliaments of the UK, the Netherlands, France and Germany, as well as in the US Congress.

Note that such discourse, perhaps more than any other discourse, is 'for the record'. All speeches and even spontaneous interruptions are recorded and published, even if some countries allow later 'editing'. Speeches,

therefore, are seldom spontaneous, and usually carefully prepared, written statements read out loud. For delicate topics such as ethnic affairs, we may expect that such discourse is heavily monitored, politically as well as morally. With the exception of some extremist right-wing parties, e.g. the Front National in France, blatantly racist talk is very rare in present day western parliaments.

However, as we have seen above, there are more indirect and subtle ways to express underlying opinions and attitudes, whether more liberal or more conservative ones. Despite the difference in style and function, we found that parliamentary discourse has some striking resemblances with other forms of talk about ethnic minorities, such as positive self-presentation, denial of racism and negative other-presentation. Therefore, let us examine, finally, what specific patterns the denial of racism takes in western parliaments.

#### *Nationalist self-glorification*

Parliament is the prime forum for nationalistic rhetoric. This is particularly true when international norms and values, such as democracy, equal rights and tolerance are involved. Accusations of racism in such a context, may easily be heard as a moral indictment of the nation as a whole, and are therefore permitted, though resented, only in partisan debates, in which one party accuses the other of racism. After all, racism is always *elsewhere*, and always a property of the *others*.

Against this background, it may be expected that any debate on ethnic affairs, and particularly those in which the rights of minorities or immigrants are at stake, nationalist positive self-presentation is an important strategic prelude to statements that precisely intend to limit such rights. Let us give some examples from each of these parliaments. All examples are taken from the parliamentary records of the respective countries, and from debates held between 1985 and 1990. The detailed context of the discussion is not given here, nor are the speakers or parties identified. For the purpose of this article we merely identify the countries involved, e.g. in order to show the similarity of such talk across national boundaries.

- (27) Our debate today not only regards the refugees, but our whole society, and the responsibility of Europe and the Netherlands to maintain fundamental human rights in the world. The right of asylum is the national component of a consistent human rights policy (the Netherlands).
- (28) I believe that we are a wonderfully fair country. We stick to the rules unlike some foreign governments (UK).
- (29) Our country has long been open to foreigners, a tradition of hospitality going back, beyond the Revolution, to the *Ancien Regime* (France).
- (30) France, which has shown the world the road to democracy and to human rights, France land of welcome and asylum, France present on five continents, could not yield to racial hate (France).

- (31) I know of no other country on this earth that gives more prominence to the rights of resident foreigners than does this bill in our country (Germany).
- (32) This is a nation whose values and traditions now excite the world, as we all know. I think we all have a deep pride in American views, American ideals, American government, American principles, which excite hundreds of millions of people around the world who struggle for freedom (USA).
- (33) There are so many great things about our country, all the freedoms that we have, speech, religion, the right to vote and choose our leaders and of course our greatness lies in our mobility, the ability to each and every one of us, regardless of the circumstances of our birth, to rise in American society, to pursue our individual dreams (USA).

Although nationalist rhetoric may differ in different countries (it is usually more exuberant in France and in the USA, for instance), the basic strategy of positive self-presentation appears in all Houses: we are fair, respect human rights, have a long tradition of tolerance, etc. It is not uncommon to hear in *each* parliament, that at least some representatives think of their own country as the most liberal, freedom-loving, democratic, etc. in the world.

*Fair, but . . .*

Such self-glorification, especially when introducing a debate on minorities or immigration, has various functions in parliamentary discourse. For those groups or parties that oppose legislation in favour of minorities or immigrants, positive self-presentation often functions as a disclaimer, that is, as an introduction for a '*but*', followed by arguments in favour of special restrictions, as is also the case in the following fragment from a radio interview with Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers:

- (34) In practice, we should come to opportunities and possibilities for them, but in practice we should also come to a less soft approach. There should be a line like: we also hold them responsible [literally: 'we address them'].

Elsewhere we find a nearly routine combination of fairness on the one hand, and firmness, realism, pragmatism, etc., on the other hand:

- (35) National and international responsibility for people in emergency situations, combined with obligations that follow from agreements, are our policy principles. This should remain as it is. But of course we need to take measures, especially when it is clear that many improper, not bona fide, apparently unfounded applications for asylum are being made, and that in some cases also the problems people experience are being exploited for commercial ends (The Netherlands).
- (36) It is fair to establish visa controls as long as there is mutual agreement about them between the countries involved. They are the best way to control immigration fairly, so that those who properly qualify



to come here or to leave this country to visit other countries can do so. Such controls make sure that people have the right qualifications for travel (UK).

- (37) If we are to work seriously for harmony, non-discrimination and equality of opportunity in our cities, that has to be accompanied by firm and fair immigration control (UK).
- (38) The period of expansion of our country has been at an end for more than 15 years, and this population of foreigners lives in the midst of a French population that is deeply touched by recession and unemployment, a question we must deal with humanely but also reasonably, because I do not hesitate to say that after the time of illusions comes necessarily that of realism (France).
- (39) It belongs to this fair balance of interests that the further immigration of foreigners must be limited, because for each society there are limits to the ability and the readiness to integrate (Germany).
- (40) This substitute offers the House of Representatives an opportunity to enact a landmark civil rights bill that is both fair and pragmatic (USA).

This remarkably similar rhetoric of fairness ('fair, but strict', etc.) in the different countries also seeks to combine two opposed ideological or political aims, namely the humanitarian values of tolerance or hospitality on the one hand, and the common-sense values of 'realism' on the other. In other words, the humanitarian aims are recognized, but at the same time they are rejected as being too idealistic and, therefore, impractical in the business of everyday political management and decision-making. The reference to fairness also serves as an element in a 'balance', namely in order to mitigate the negative implications of proposed legislation, such as limitations on further immigration in the European debates, and limitations on the 1990 Civil Rights Bill (eventually vetoed by President Bush) in the USA.

Positive presentation of such legislation, and of the parties or groups who support it, also involves strategic argumentative moves such as apparent altruism ('It is in their own best interests'), choice of the lesser evil ('Restriction of immigration prevents conflicts in the inner cities') and other moves that emphasize that the speaker or party has the national interest, the interests of their own (white) population, as well the interests of the minorities and the immigrants or refugees in mind. Such a 'predicament' is sketched by the Dutch Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Mr van den Broek:

- (41) The government is confronted with a Dutch society which reacts dividedly to the increasing number of asylum applications. [Some people want a liberal admission policy.] On the other hand, there are more or less latent movements who consider the influx of aliens as a threat to Dutch society.

Interestingly, governments tend to listen especially to those citizens who agree with the attitudes such governments have helped to create in the first place, as was the case with the refugee scare in the Netherlands during the last few years. That is, there is no real predicament, only a semblance of

balancing popular feelings and interests. By using the populist argument for immigration control, thus, the government is able to legitimate its own policies by claiming support it has manufactured itself. This is done by creating a panic about 'waves' of refugees entering the country, a definition of the situation that is largely adopted also by the press, so that it also reaches the public at large (van Dijk, 1988c).

### *Denial of racism*

In such a political context of public impression management, the denial of racism plays a prominent role. Whatever the political orientation or party involved, including the extremist Right, all parliamentarians, emphatically reject any accusation or suggestion of prejudice, discrimination or racism. Indeed, the more racist the opinions professed, the more insistent are the denials of racism, as may be apparent in the following quotes from representatives of the Front National in the French Assemblée Nationale:

- (42) We are neither racist nor xenophobic. Our aim is only that, quite naturally, there be a hierarchy, because we are dealing with France, and France is the country of the French.
- (43) No, the French are neither racist, nor antisemitic, nor xenophobic nor revisionist. They may be worried in the face of an immigration which is out of control, in the face of an Islam pure and hard that might cross the Mediterranean. But the French stay tolerant.

Note that in both cases, an explicit or implicit *but* follows the denial. In the first case, the speaker (the leader of the Front National, Le Pen) even claims that it is 'natural' to have a hierarchy between the own group, the French, and the immigrants. This assignment of a 'natural' right to a superior position, is at the heart of racist ideologies. The second example is more indirect, and focuses on the 'worries' of ordinary French people, faced with a different culture and a different religion. Besides the discursive and political strategy of populism, which is very prominent in such debates ('The people would resent it', 'You should listen to what ordinary French, English . . . people say'), we also find the element of euphemism: we are not racist, only worried. Here is a more sophisticated example of such a strategy:

- (44) The French are not racist. But, facing this continuous increase of the foreign population in France, one has witnessed the development, in certain cities and neighbourhoods, of reactions that come close to xenophobia. In the eyes of the French unemployed man, for instance, the foreigner may easily become a rival, towards whom a sentiment of animosity may threaten to appear.

Following the usual *but*, we do not find, as in other disclaimers, a negative statement about immigrants, but rather an explanation of the reaction of the 'common man' (women are apparently not involved). Note that the way this explanation is formulated ('continuous increase', 'rival') suggests understanding, if not an excuse, as in the usual accounts of racism in terms of economic competition. The denial of racism itself is rather

complex, however. It is a denial that holds for the French in general. It is followed by a partial concession, duly limited by heavy mitigation and hedging ('coming close to xenophobia', 'a sentiment of animosity may threaten to appear'), as well as limited in place (In certain cities'). In other words, prejudice, discrimination and racism are local incidents, and should also be seen as being provoked by continuous immigration, arguments we also found in the right-wing British press.

When restrictive measures are being debated, those who support them feel impelled to remind their audience, and the public at large, that such political decisions have nothing to do with prejudice or racism:

- (45) I hope that people outside, whether they are black or white and wherever they come from, will recognize that these are not major changes resulting from prejudice (UK).
- (46) My Hon. Friend and I will continue to apply a strict but fair system of control, not because we are prejudiced or inhumane, but because we believe that control is needed if all the people who live in our cities are to live together in tolerance and decent harmony (UK).

Such denials need argumentative support. Saying only that the measures are 'fair' may be seen as too flimsy. Therefore, we find the moves we have found earlier, such as concern for the inner cities. Note that such arguments also imply a move of transfer: we are not racist, but the poor people in the inner cities are, and we should avoid exacerbating the mood of resentment among the population at large. This argument is rather typical of what we have called 'elite racism', which consistently denies racism among the own elite group, but recognizes that others, especially poor, white people may fail to be as tolerant.

#### *Denial and reproach*

In the analysis of the British press, we have found that denials of racism easily transform into attacks against anti-racists. Such a strategy may also be found in parliamentary discourse. Thus, conservative representatives will not accept accusations or even implicit suggestions that their stricter immigration or ethnic minority policies are categorized as racist by other politicians. Since the official norm is 'that we are all tolerant citizens', such allegations are declared unacceptable:

- (47) Addressing myself to the people of the left, I repeat again that we are . I have noted in your words, my God, terms such as racism and xenophobia, that those who do not support your proposals would be judged with the same terms. It should be understood once and for all: we are not racists because we combat your text (France).
- (48) You will allow me to tell you that in no circumstance this debate should be prejudged by insinuating that, on these benches, the only antiracists are over there, whereas we, by opposition, would be racists (France).
- (49) Well, now can we also agree this afternoon that you can have different philosophies about how to achieve through law civil rights and

equal opportunities for everybody without somehow being anti-civil-rights or being a racist or something like that (USA).

One interesting case may be found in a German debate on the new Aliens Bill. When one of the Green Party representatives qualifies the provisions of the Bill as 'racist', a term that is as unusual in official German discourse as it is in the Netherlands, conservative representatives are furious. Even the Speaker of the Bundestag intervenes:

- (50) A chill ran down my back when our colleague ... said that this bill was a form of institutionalized racism. Whereas the older ones among us had to live twelve years under institutionalized racism, Ladies and Gentlemen, I beg you, and in particular our younger colleagues, to show respect for these terrible experiences, and not to introduce such concepts to our everyday political business.

In other words, evaluations in terms of racism are limited only to the Nazi past, and are banned from official political discourse. At most, the term *Auslanderfeindlichkeit* (literally: animosity against foreigners) may be used. 'Racism' thus is by definition too strong, if only because the present situation cannot be compared to the monstrosities of the Nazis. A similar attitude exists in the Netherlands, where racism is also avoided as a term in public (political, media) discourse because it is understood only in terms of extremist, right-wing ideologies of racial superiority.

### *Reversal*

Although moderate reproaches directed against anti-racist delegates are not uncommon in parliament, reversal is rather exceptional. However, it is quite typical for right-wing party representatives, such as those of the Front National in France. Being routinely accused, also explicitly, of racism, they go beyond mere denial, and reverse the charges. For them, this means that the others, and especially the socialists, allegedly letting in so many immigrants and granting them equal rights, are guilty of what they call 'anti-French racism':

- (51) There exists a form of racism, my dear colleagues [interruptions] that is passed over silently, but of which the manifestations nowadays reach an insupportable level and a scope that should concern us: that is anti-French racism.

Another way of reversing the charges is to accuse the anti-racists of being themselves responsible for creating racism, if only by not listening to the people and by letting so many non-European immigrants enter the country:

- (52) Well, France today, according to what those creatures of the world tell us who often have come to take refuge in our country ... France is the least racist country that exists in the world. We can't tolerate hearing it said that France is a racist country. ... In this respect, this law proposal, because of the debate that is taking place at this moment, secretes and fabricates racism!

These examples taken from several western parliaments show that

although the debate may be couched in less extremist terms than in much of the right-wing or tabloid press, or in everyday conversations, rather similar strategies and moves are used to talk about ethnic affairs. Most characteristic of this kind of political discourse is not merely the nationalist self-praise, but also the strategic management of impression: whatever we decide, we are fair. Since, especially in Europe, ethnic minorities, let alone new immigrants and refugees, have virtually no political power, this 'balancing act' of presenting policies as 'firm but fair' is obviously addressed primarily to the dominant white public at large. When defined as humane without being too soft, thus, the government and its supporting parties may be acceptable as essentially reasonable: we take energetic measures, but we are not racist.

In other words, besides managing impressions, such political discourse also manages its own legitimation by manufacturing consent on ethnic policies, and at the same time manages the politics of ethnic affairs, immigration and international relations.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Whether in the streets of the inner city, in the press or in parliament, dominant group members are often engaged in discourse about 'them': ethnic minority groups, immigrants or refugees, who have come to live in the country. Such discourses, as well as the social cognitions underlying them, are complex and full of contradictions. They may be inspired by general norms of tolerance and acceptance, but also, and sometimes at the same time, by feelings of distrust, resentment or frustration about those 'others'.

Topics, stories and argumentation may thus construct a largely negative picture of minorities or immigrants, e.g. in terms of cultural differences, deviance or competition, as a problem or as a threat to 'our' country, territory, space, housing, employment, education, norms, values, habits or language. Such talk and text, therefore, is not a form of individual discourse, but social, group discourse, and expresses not only individual opinions, but rather socially shared representations.

However, negative talk about minority groups or immigrants may be heard as biased, prejudiced or racist, and as inconsistent with general values of tolerance. This means that such discourse needs to be hedged, mitigated, excused, explained or otherwise managed in such a way that it will not 'count' against the speaker or writer. Face-keeping, positive self-presentation and impression management are the usual strategies that language users have recourse to in such a situation of possible 'loss of face': they have to make sure that they are not misunderstood and that no unwanted inferences are made from what they say.

One of the major strategic ways white speakers and writers engage in such a form of impression management is the denial of racism. They may simply claim they did not say anything negative, or focus on their inten-

tions: it may have sounded negative, but was not intended that way. Similarly, they may mitigate their negative characterization of the others by using euphemisms, implications or vague allusions. They may make apparent concessions, on the one hand, and on the other hand support their negative discourse by arguments, stories or other supporting 'facts'.

Also, speakers and writers may abandon their position of positive self-presentation and self-defence and take a more active, aggressive counter-attack: the ones who levelled the accusations of racism are the real problem, if not the real racists. They are the ones who are intolerant, and they are against 'our' own people. We are the victims of immigration, and we are discriminated against.

It is interesting to note that despite the differences in style for different social groups, such discourse may be found at any social level, and in any social context. That is, both the 'ordinary' white citizens as well as the white elites need to protect their social self-image, and at the same time they have to manage the interpretation and the practices in an increasingly variegated social and cultural world. For the dominant group, this means that dominance relations must be reproduced, at the macro- as well as at the micro-level, both in action as well as in mind.

Negative representations of the dominated group are essential in such a reproduction process. However, such attitudes and ideologies are inconsistent with dominant democratic and humanitarian norms and ideals. This means that the dominant group must protect itself, cognitively and discursively, against the damaging charge of intolerance and racism. Cognitive balance may be restored only by actually being or becoming anti-racist, by accepting minorities and immigrants as equals, or else by denying racism. It is this choice white groups in Europe and North America are facing. So far they have largely chosen the latter option.

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