RACIST DISCOURSE

Racist discourse is a form of discriminatory social practice that manifests itself in text, talk and communication. Together with other (non-verbal) discriminatory practices, racist discourse contributes to the reproduction of racism as a form of ethnic or "racial" domination. It does so typically by expressing, confirming or legitimating racist opinions, attitudes and ideologies of the dominant ethnic group. Although there are other racisms elsewhere in the world, the most prevalent and devastating form of racism has historically been European racism against non-European peoples, which will be the focus of this essay.

Two forms of racist discourse

There are two major forms of racist discourse:

1 racist discourse *directed at* ethnically different Others;
2 racist discourse *about* ethnically different Others.

The first form of racist discourse is one of the many discriminatory ways that dominant group members verbally interact with members of dominated groups: ethic minorities, immigrants, refugees, etc. They may do so blatantly by using

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derogatory slurs, insults, impolite forms of address, and other forms of discourse that explicitly express and enact superiority and lack of respect.

Since today such blatant forms of verbal discrimination are generally found to be "politically incorrect," much racist discourse directed at dominated ethnic group members tends to become more subtle and indirect. Thus, white speakers may refuse to yield the floor to minority speakers, interrupt them inappropriately, ignore the topics suggested by their interlocutors, focus on topics that imply negative properties of the ethnic minority group to which the recipient belongs, speak too loudly, show a bored face, avoid eye contact, use a haughty intonation, and many other manifestations of lack of respect. Some of these verbal inequities are more generally a problem of multicultural communication; others are genuine expressions of racial or ethnic dominance of white speakers.

In other words, these are the kinds of discourse and verbal interaction that are normally considered deviant or unacceptable during conversation with in-group members, and therefore are forms of domination that have has been called "everyday racism." Of course, they also occur in conversations with people of the "own" group, but are then sanctioned as being rude or impolite. The fundamental difference is that minority group members *daily* are confronted with such racist talk, and not because of what they do or say, but only because of what they are: different. They are thus subjected to an accumulating and aggravating form of racist harassment that is a direct threat to their well-being and quality of life.

The second form of racist discourse is usually addressed to other dominant group members and is *about* ethnic or "racial" Others. Such discourse may range from informal everyday conversations or organizational dialogues (such as parliamentary debates), to many written or multimedia types of text or communicative events, such as TV shows, movies, news reports, editorials, textbooks, scholarly publications, laws, contracts, and so on.

The overall characteristic of such racist discourse is the negative portrayal of *Them*, often combined with a positive representation of *Ourselves*. The corollary of this strategy is to avoid or mitigate a positive representation of Others, and a negative representation of our own group.

Typical for the latter case is the denial or mitigation of racism.

These overall strategies may appear at all levels of text and talk, that is, at the level of visuals, sounds (volume, intonation), syntax (word order), semantics (meaning and reference), style (variable uses of words and word order), rhetoric (persuasive uses of grammar or of "figures" of style), pragmatics (speech acts such as assertions or threats), interaction, and so on.

Topics

Thus, *topics* of conversation, news reports, political debates or scholarly articles about minorities or immigrants may be biased in the sense that they focus on or imply negative stereotypes. Thus, immigration may be dealt with in terms of an invasion, a deluge, a threat, or at least as a major problem, instead of as an important and necessary contribution to the economy, the demography or the cultural diversity of the country.

Research into conversation, media, textbooks and other discourse genres has shown that of a potentially infinite number of topics or themes, text and talk about minorities or immigrants, typically clusters around three main topic classes.

The first class features topics of discourse that emphasize the *difference* of the Others, and hence their distance from Us. Such emphasis may have a seemingly positive slant if the Others are described in exotic terms. More often than not, however, the difference is evaluated negatively: the Others are portrayed as less smart, beautiful, fast, hardworking, democratic, modern, etc. than We are. These topics are typical in everyday conversations, textbooks and especially the mass media. This first step of in-group–out-group polarization in discourse, which also characterizes the underlying attitudes and ideologies expressed in these discourses, usually also implies that They are all the same (and We are all individually different).

The second group of topics takes polarization between Us and Them one step further and emphasizes that the behavior of the Other is *deviant*, and hence breaks Our norms and rules: They do not (want to) speak our language, they walk around in funny dress, they have strange habits, they eat strange food, they mistreat their women, and so on. The presupposition or conclusion of such topics is generally that They do not, but should, adapt to Us. On the other hand,

even when they totally adapt, the Others will still be seen as different.

Thirdly, the Other may be portrayed as a *threat* to Us. This happens from the moment they arrive, for instance when immigration is represented as an invasion, until the new citizens have settled in "our" country, in which case they may be seen as occupying our space, running down our neighborhood, taking our jobs or houses, harassing "our" women, and so on.

The most prominent threat theme however is crime. All statistics on the coverage of immigrants – or otherwise marginal or marginalized people – show that in everyday conversations, the media and political discourse, various kinds of crime invariably show up as a permanent association with minorities and immigrants: passport fraud, assault, robbery, and especially drugs. Indeed, the quite common expression "ethnic crime" suggests that such crime is seen as a special and different category: crime thus becomes racialized. Doing drugs in the USA and other countries is seen as a typically "black" crime. On the other hand, "normal" topics, such as those of politics, the economy, work, or ("high") culture are seldom associated with minorities. If they are reported positively in the news, blacks do so mostly as champions in sports or as musicians.

According to the overall strategy of positive Self-presentation and negative Other-presentation, neutral or positive topics about Us are preferred, whereas the negative ones are ignored or suppressed. Thus, a story may be about discrimination against minorities, but since such a story is inconsistent with positive Self-presentation, it tends to be relegated to a less prominent part of the page or newspaper.

The discursive logic of racist positive Self-presentation and negative Other-presentation not only controls the fundamental level of global content or topics, but extends to all other levels and dimensions of discourse. Thus, lexicalization, or the choice of words, tends to be biased in many ways, not only in explicit racial or ethnic slurs, but also in more subtle forms of discourse, beginning with the very problem of naming the Others. There has been opposition to changes in naming practices: for example, the movement from (among other terms) "colored," "Negro," "Afro American," "African American" to "people of color" was opposed at different stages in history and by different groups, including, we might add, some African Americans.

Another well-known way to emphasize *Their* bad things is to use sentence forms that make bad agency more salient, such as active sentences. On the other hand, if *Our* racism or police harassment needs to be spoken or written about, the grammar allows us to mitigate such acts that are inconsistent with a positive Self-image, for instance by using passive phrases ("They were harassed by the police," or "They were harassed") or nominalizations ("harassment") instead of the direct active phrase ("Police harassed black youths").

Similar forms of emphasis and mitigation are typically managed by rhetorical figures, such as hyperbole and euphemisms. Thus, few Western countries or institutions explicitly deal with (own!) racism, and both in political discourse and well as in the media, many forms of mitigation are currently being used, such as "discrimination," "bias," or even "popular discontent." On the other hand, the opposite takes place whenever the Others do something we do not like. Thus, for starters, and as we have seen, immigration is often described using the military metaphor of an invasion. Similarly, large groups of immigrants or asylum seekers are described not only and simply in large numbers, but typically in terms of threatening amounts of water or snow in which *We* may drown: waves, floods, avalanches, etc. The same is true for the so-called "number game," used broadly in politics and the media, a strategy that emphasizes the number of immigrants in society by constantly emphasizing how many new people have arrived.

Strategies of presentation

Discourse is more than just words or sentences. It is typically characterized also at more global levels of analysis, as we have seen for the study of topics. In the same way, discourse has more global forms, formats or schemas that may become conventionalized, such as the typical format of a story, a news report in the press, a scientific article or a mundane everyday conversation. Although these formats are quite general and hence do not normally change in different contexts, and hence are the same in (say) racist or antiracist discourse – indeed, a racist story or joke is just as much a story or joke as an antiracist one – there are some interesting ways

in which such structures may be related to different intentions or opinions of language users.

Thus, we found that in negative everyday stories about foreign neighbors, people tended to emphasize the *Complication* category, contrasting it with the peaceful *Orientation* category ("I was just walking on the street, and then suddenly..."), but often leave out the *Resolution* category, as if to stress that the presence of foreigners is a problem which cannot be resolved. Typically, the less-biased speakers in such a case *do* mention some form of (positive) resolution, even if they were initially confronted with some "trouble."

Similarly, in parliamentary debates, editorials, scientific articles and any other discourse in which arguments are very important, we also may expect ways in which the argumentation tends to be biased against the Other. Authoritative sources, such as the police or (white) experts, are being mentioned in order to "prove" that the immigrants are illegal, cannot be trusted, or need to be problematized, marginalized, removed or expelled. This move is typical for the well-known fallacy of "authority." Immigration debates are replete with such fallacies, for example, the fallacy of exaggeration, in which the arrival of a small group of refugees may be extrapolated to a national catastrophe by a comment such as, "if we have lax immigration laws, all refugees will come to our country."

Finally, discourse is also more than words and global structures in the sense that it is semiotically associated with visual information, such as page layout, placement, pictures, tables, and so on, as is the case in the press, or for film on TV, or on the internet. These nonverbal messages are also powerful ways of implementing the general strategy of positive Self-presentation and negative Other-presentation. Thus, articles in the press that are about *Their* crime or violence (such as urban disturbances defined as "race riots") tend to appear on the front page, on top, in large articles, with big headlines, with prominent pictures in which *They* are represented as aggressive or *We* (or Our Police) as victims. On the other hand, our racism, or the harassment of blacks by "Our" police will seldom occupy such a prominent place, and will tend to be relegated to the inner pages, to less substantial articles, and not emphasized in headlines.

In sum, we see that in many genres, and at all levels and dimensions of text and talk, racism and prejudice may daily be expressed, enacted and reproduced by discourse as one of the practices of a racist society.

Such discourse, however, does not come alone, and takes its conditions, consequences and functions in communicative, interactional and societal contexts. Biased or stereotypical news is produced in media organizations, by journalists and other professionals. Parliamentary debates are conducted by politicians. Textbooks, lessons, and scholarly publications are produced by teachers and scholars. They do so in different roles and as members of many different professional and other social groups, and as part of daily routines and procedures. News is gathered under the control of editors, and typically under majority institutions and organizations, such as government agencies, the police, the universities or the courts. Minority groups and sources are systematically ignored or attributed less relevance or expertise. The newsrooms in North America, Europe and Australia are largely white. Minority journalists are underemployed and discriminated against, with the usual fake arguments. No wonder that the dominant discourse of society, especially also about ethnic affairs and minority communities, is badly informed and hence informs badly. In other words, racist societies and institutions produce racist discourses, and racist discourses reproduce the stereotypes, prejudices and ideologies that are used to defend and legitimize white dominance. It is in this way that the symbolic, discursive circle is closed and dominant elite talk and text contributes to the reproduction of racism.

Fortunately, the same is true for antiracist discourse. And once such discourse is engaged in by responsible leaders in the media, politics, education, research, the courts, corporate business and the state bureaucracies, we may hope that society will become diverse and hence truly democratic.

SEE ALSO: bigotry; colonial discourse; cultural racism; epithet (racial/slang); humor; inferential racism; language; media; Other; policing; postcolonial; race: as signifier; racial coding; racialization; representations; systemic racism; whiteness

Reading

Discourses of Domination: Racial bias in the Canadian English-language press by Frances Henry and Carol