# "Talking Race" in University Classes: A Discourse Analytical Approach

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Many university classes introduce issues of race and racism – topics that are difficult for some people to discuss openly. The ICU ELP Program, for example, includes challenging readings on race and racism as a focus for class discussion and writing assignments. In this article, we discuss an approach to the analysis of race and racism that can help students apply their critical thinking skills to this important topic. We argue that focusing on the discourse of race offers rich opportunities for class discussion and student writing. Specifically, we summarize critical discourse analysis, particularly its understanding of the concept of "racism," and we provide suggestions and examples for its use in class.

University classes at ICU and elsewhere address profound social, political, cultural and economic issues of race and racism. The ICU English Language Program (ELP), for example, includes six thematic units that form the basis for lessons in reading and writing. The six units are: educational values and critical thinking; reading literature; culture, perception and communication; issues of race; bioethics; and visions of the future. *The ELP Reader* (ICU English Language Program, 2007) includes core readings for each of these topics. Lessons for the readings focus on content as well as a wide range of reading and writing skills. In this article, we discuss the thematic unit "issues of race" in order to identify some of the challenges facing classes in which race is a major topic. We distinguish explicit ("old") and implicit ("new") forms of racism, arguing that implicit forms of racism require a discourse analytical approach to analyzing race. We believe that this approach offers provocative opportunities for class discussion of race and racism.

**Race and Racism in *The ELP Reader*: A Scientific Approach**

Three of the four readings about race in *The ELP Reader* originally appeared in the magazine *Discover* in November, 1994: "The Geometry of Race," by Stephen Jay Gould; "Terms of Estrangement" by James Shreeve, and "Race without Color" by Jared Diamond. The fourth reading is Pat Shipman's "Sweeping toward a Racial Abyss," which includes selections from Shipman's book, *The Evolution of Racism: Human Differences and the Use and Abuse of Science*. Although the readings vary in their content and focus, they comprise a complex and well integrated set of readings, which, taken together, spell out key ideas about race. These ideas may be summarized as follows: (a) Racial categories (e.g., black, white, Asian, African) do not stand up to empirical scientific investigation. That is, racial categories are inherently arbitrary, as evidenced by the fact that scientific efforts to establish racial categories result in multiple and contradictory groupings, even when genetic criteria are used. Indeed, racial differences are scientifically so unimportant that the very concept of "race" has little or no scientific validity. (b) Nevertheless, as Shipman shows, explicitly racist programs such as the eugenics movement in the United States and elsewhere and Nazism in Germany have distorted science in order to justify repression and violence against racial minorities. To undermine such movements and reduce racism, scientific education should focus on the speciousness of the concept of race. (c) Implicit in the readings is an understanding of racism as a belief system about the relative value of different racial groups, usually with "whites" or "Caucasians" at the pinnacle of a racial hierarchy. Within this perspective, anyone can be a racist, if they believe that one racial group is superior to others. (d) Viewing racism as a belief system about race places empirical evidence, logical argument, and education at the center of anti-racist efforts. Hence the authors appropriately focus on the scientific analysis of race.

The writings of Gould, Shreeve, Diamond, and Shipman reveal the irrationality of racist ideology by pointing out the weak scientific basis for the concept of race and the genetically negligible differences among races. But their argument contains a danger in its logic: If we argue that discriminating against people on the basis of race is wrong because the concept of "race" does not have biological reality, does it follow that racism may be justified if race were a biologically salient category? As early as 1963, Ernst Mayr, one of the most important developers of contemporary ideas about evolution, aptly addressed the problem:

Equality in spite of evident nonidentity is a somewhat sophisticated concept and requires a moral stature of which many individuals seem to be incapable. They rather deny human variability and equate equality with identity. Or they claim that the human species is exceptional in the organic world in that only morphological characters are controlled by genes and all other traits of the mind or character are due to "conditioning" or other nongenetic factors . . . An ideology based on such obviously wrong premises can only lead to disaster. Its championship of human equality is based on a claim of identity. As soon as it is proved that the latter does not exist, the support of equality is likewise lost (Mayr, 1963, p. 649).

Mayr's point becomes clear if we look at gender. While biologists may consider racial categories to be scientifically irrelevant, all biologists agree that the male-female distinction is biologically salient. The differences between men and women are systematic, and such differences are found at genetic, biological and even neurological levels. Does that make sexism more reasonable than racism?

Pinker (2002) argues that the case against racism and sexism is a moral stance that does not depend on the biological sameness of people:

The case against bigotry is not a factual claim that humans are biologically indistinguishable. It is a moral stance that condemns judging an *individual* according to the average traits of certain *groups* to which the individual belongs. Enlightened societies choose to ignore race, sex and ethnicity in hiring, promotion, salary, school admissions, and the criminal justice system because the alternative is morally repugnant. Discriminating against people on the basis of race, sex, or ethnicity would be unfair, penalizing them for traits over which they have no control. It would perpetuate the injustices of the past, . . . rend society into hostile factions and [it] could escalate into horrific persecution. But none of these arguments against discrimination depends on whether groups of people are or are not genetically indistinguishable (p. 145).

The real problem of racism does not lie in racial categories. However flimsy the concept of race may be, human beings continue to *perceive* race, although that in

3

itself is not a problem. The fundamental issue is how we *use* racial categories in our social lives. It may be justifiable and beneficial for a forensic anthropologist to use racial categories when identifying a decomposed corpse, as mentioned in Shreeve's article, but using racial categories to limit access to education or jobs is not. The key idea is that equality does not require identity, and differences need not and should not translate to inequality.

Still, debunking quasi-evolutionist racist ideology by pointing to the falsity of its claims has its own value. False claims made under the guise of science need to be refuted not just in science but in popular discourse. However, debunking a specific ideology is not sufficient for countering racism, because racism is, like humans, omnivorous. Deny it a particular ideological diet (such as Blumenbach's belief in the superiority of "Caucasians," as described in Gould's article) and it will survive on something else. Thanks to the advancement of science and education, Blumenbach's five-race theory that places "Caucasians" as the ideal prototype from which other races have degenerated sounds today like the belief that the earth is flat – something antique and obviously wrong to a point that is almost comical. Extreme forms of racism, such as slavery, violence, and segregation laws, are also relatively infrequent today, and such acts are rightly recognized as inhumane and criminal. Yet racism persists, not because some people remain stubbornly attached to Blumenbach's theory, but because there are always new ideologies generated to fuel racism, whose form also changes over time. Today, forced sterilization and the legal denial of civil rights have been replaced by new forms of racism, called "symbolic racism," "everyday racism," or "new racism" (Barker, 1981); these forms of racism are supported by new, subtle racist ideologies. One challenge for class discussion of race and racism is to develop a framework for understanding these new ideologies and new forms of racism.

Implicit forms of racism often emphasize alleged aspects of minority cultures, such as reliance on welfare, low school achievement, drug use, violence, and affirmative action, which, it is believed, come together to form pathological cultures that are distinct from "mainstream" white culture. A central characteristic of these implicit forms of racism is that they are usually not called "racism" at all (see Barker, 1981; van Dijk, n.d.). Instead, the view of minority cultures as pathological is allegedly based on observation of reality and commonsense knowledge about minority groups. Sociological, linguistic and cultural "facts" are called upon to support such views. For example, in the latest of his controversial best-sellers, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's*

*National Identity*, Samuel Huntington (2004) offers socio-cultural reasons why recent Latino immigrants in the United States are (he claims) much less likely to speak English than European immigrants of the past: Latinos speak a common language, unlike earlier European immigrants who were linguistically diverse; Latinos are residentially segregated in the U.S. Southwest and a few major cities where Spanish is a working language; Latinos are much less interested than past immigrants in cultural assimilation; and Latinos are controlled by activists who encourage their cultural distinctiveness and maintenance of Spanish. Huntington believes that Latino immigrants' alleged insistence on speaking Spanish is incompatible with the "American dream," which he considers to be the core of American national identity: "There is no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican-Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English" (p. 256).

While many social scientists (e.g., Rumbaut, Massey & Bean, 2006) have demonstrated that the central claims of Huntington's argument are in fact empirically wrong, the popularity of Huntington's work suggests that its "Anglo-Protestant," English-only ideology (which is not empirically testable) is widely held and politically popular. But is Huntington's work "racist"? Our view is that Blumenbach's quasi-biological ideology, which offered a "scientific" justification for $20^{th}$ century racist practices, is not the sole nourishing source of racism. In "The Geometry of Race," Gould maintains that Blumenbach's five-race system inadvertently laid the foundation of racism, but clearly racism did not originate in the early $19^{th}$ century; indeed, slavery existed long before Blumenbach's theory of race. Rather than developing from a single ideology, racism persists through different ages, feeding on whatever ideologies are available at the time. For that reason, refuting racist ideology can be a Sisyphean task. With the demise of explicit forms of racism like eugenics and Nazism, we need a framework for analyzing race and racism that students can use to examine work such as Huntington's. Is such work racist? Why or why not? What do we mean by "racism"?

To summarize: The understanding of racism as a belief system about "Caucasian" superiority does not explain why racism persists long after societies have dismissed the idea of racial superiority. Indeed, students in class discussions routinely recognize the difficulty in defining racism and in determining what constitutes racist practices. A productive direction for discussion of race is to focus on how racism is expressed, why it persists, and

what its social value may be. These questions place *discourse* rather than scientific argument or empirical data at the center of attention. By focusing on discourse, we shift attention away from scientific facts about race to *ways of "talking race,"* and their social implications – that is, to the content and forms of texts and talk that are produced and circulated in the society, and the way such texts and talk are linked to actual social practices.

### A Discourse Analytical Approach to Race and Racism

One of the most influential theories of racist discourse is that of van Dijk (1990, 1993a, 1993b), who works within the framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which he prefers to call "critical discourse studies." CDA does not refer to a specific method of analysis, but instead is an interdisciplinary academic movement of scholars who are committed to social and political activism, or who adopt a critical perspective toward public discourse (van Dijk, n.d.). CDA is particularly appropriate for class discussion in the ELP and other university classes because it encourages the application of critical thinking to everyday social life by examining discourse in society: how discourse is produced and interpreted, and what function the discourse serves in society (Gee, 1999). While various methodologies are employed in CDA, an informal, qualitative discourse analysis does not require specific knowledge and skills. Introducing CDA by encouraging students to collect and critically analyze newspaper articles, selections from television and video, and other discourse data can help raise students' awareness of racism as an ongoing social problem, not as an atrocity of the past that is on its way to a natural extinction.

### *Key Concepts in CDA*

If CDA is to be used in class, we must first have a basic notion of how CDA can contribute to understanding race and racism. In this section, we introduce some useful ideas from van Dijk's general theoretical framework on discourse, racism, and society. A key focus is "social representations" of individuals or groups as "black," "white," "Asian," or other ethno-racial categories. The reason for calling them "social" representations is that they are *shared* beliefs, values, norms, attitudes, and ideologies that one needs to have in

6

order to function as a competent member of society. Social representations influence individuals' understanding of *specific*, personal experience. For example, imagine a white, middle-class individual in a park in Los Angeles observing a mother and child walking together speaking Spanish. This particular, specific event becomes part of personal experience and memory, but that experience and memory are fundamentally shaped by the observer's "social knowledge" about Latinos. In this case, the event might register as a case of "Latinos holding on to Spanish and refusing to learn English."

One type of social representation is stereotypes, which are a central concern of CDA. The social representation of Latinos as "holding on to Spanish and refusing to learn English" may be considered a stereotype. Stereotyping is often viewed as a form of "categorization"; the difference between stereotypes and other categories is usually considered to be a matter of accuracy or legitimacy. In this view, categorization is a necessary and natural part of human cognition, but sometimes it "goes too far," resulting in an exaggerated, distorted or overly negative representation (i.e., a stereotype). From this perspective, stereotypical representations are overly broad categories – unfortunate, but understandable, and they can be corrected through education and information.

In contrast to this view, van Dijk, like Pickering (2001), argues that stereotyping is a particular and distinctive form of social cognition. In everyday life, human beings use categories to understand the world and to act in it. Usually these categories are not fixed, but somewhat flexible; they can be modified as needed, and new categories can be formed on the basis of new information. Stereotypes, on the other hand, are fixed, and they severely limit the formation of new categories. For example, racial stereotypes can persist despite clear scientific evidence that they are false. Moreover, Pickering (2001) points out that stereotypes have certain social value that mere categories do not:

> Stereotyping may operate as a way of imposing a sense of order on the social world in the same way as categories, but with the crucial difference that stereotyping attempts to deny any flexible thinking with categories. It denies this in the interests of the structures of power which it upholds. It attempts to maintain these structures as they are, or to realign them in the face of a perceived threat. The comfort of inflexibility which stereotypes provide reinforces the conviction that existing relations of power are necessary and fixed ( p. 3).

In other words, the social function of stereotypes is that they help to maintain existing social relations. In the example of "Latinos holding on to Spanish and refusing to learn English," an important question is how this stereotype is embedded in a broad system of social inequality. From this perspective, racism is not a system of beliefs about one group's superiority over another, but a system of group dominance: a system for reproducing unequal social relations that sustains the advantages and privileges of the dominant group. A corollary is that racism can only be practiced by dominant groups (e.g., "whites" in the United States). Although some individual members of subordinate groups may espouse a belief in their own superiority, such beliefs are not "racist" unless they are part of a larger social system that sustains a social hierarchy in which the group is privileged. The view of racism as a system of group dominance also goes beyond the simplistic black-vs-white formula and encompasses "ethnicism" as well. This perspective enables us to examine racism as a broad social problem that permeates many societies, not just those with a history of Nazism, slavery or eugenics.

To summarize: Social groups are composed of people who share a set of representations (which may be competing and contradictory) and who use them as a basis for interpreting the meaning of events in life and the world in general (such as a mother and child speaking Spanish or the effects of immigrants on society). These social representations influence how people interpret individual events, talk, and text. Racism is a system of group dominance that includes a social dimension (everyday discriminatory practices, such as school segregation and racial profiling), as well as a cognitive dimension (such as stereotypical representations).

To understand the persistence of racism, we must ask: How are social representations communicated and shared? It is here that discourse becomes crucial, because discourse works as an interface that connects the social and the cognitive (van Dijk, 1990, 1993a). Social representations are acquired, communicated and reproduced through various forms of discourse, including peer talk, parent-child communication, classroom interaction, lectures and discussions in educational institutions, and mass media. Logical scientific argument is only one small component in educational discourse. In fact, not all forms of discourse are equally significant in their influence on social cognition. Van Dijk calls for special attention to the discourses produced by social elites, which are "groups in society that have special power resources [such as] property, income, decision control, knowledge, expertise, position, rank, as well

as social and ideological resources such as status, prestige, fame, influence, respect, and similar resources ascribed to them by groups, institutions, or society at large" (1993b, p. 44). While elites may directly influence the actions of others (e.g., by making political decisions in government or executive decisions in a corporation), they also have significant power in shaping public opinion (van Dijk, 1993b). Scientists are one group of social elites, but their formal, written forms of scientific discourse (such as the readings about race in *The ELP Reader*) play a relatively minor role in supporting or undermining racist social representations, since the size of the audience for such texts is very small compared, for example, to a national television channel.

Particularly influential elite discourse includes mass media and political discourse, which often overlap. Political leaders appear frequently in the mass media, where they routinely define "problems" for others to discuss; in this sense, they establish social agendas. Although political leaders often claim that their concerns are determined by average people, and indeed political talk and public opinion may have a limited reciprocal relationship, elites and the public are quite asymmetrical in power. What political actors say has great influence in shaping public opinion, as does the mass media that cover such political discourse (and more). Formal political debates, newspaper editorials, public speeches, and press releases are a few of the types of texts that comprise influential forms of elite discourse.

When we look at race in elite discourse, we need to keep in mind that explicit forms of racism ("old racism" [van Dijk, n.d.]), such as violence, apartheid, and segregation laws, are rare. The explicit racism of American eugenics and German Nazism, for example, no longer has legitimacy in public discourse. Yet racism persists (often not termed "racism" at all), and is passed on (or "reproduced") through more subtle forms of discourse. In other words, social representations of racial groups in the United States and in other liberal democratic states are no longer dominated by traditional racist representations; in their place are more subtle (and often "cultural") stereotypes that are believed to be based on reality (e.g., "Latinos hold on to Spanish and refuse to learn English").

*Using Critical Discourse Analysis of Race in the Classroom*

What are the pedagogical implications of applying CDA to race and racism, understanding racism not as a belief system, but as a discourse that sustains unequal social relations of power? Three principles can guide lesson planning within this framework: (a) Students should undertake their own discourse analysis by locating and analyzing racial/ethnic stereotypes and other representations. (b) Examples of elite discourse are particularly appropriate for analysis, and can be drawn from current events. (c) Examples for analysis should be drawn from more than one cultural context.

(a) When using CDA, the first step is to examine stereotypes and other representations. Take the representation of "Latinos holding on to Spanish." What makes this a stereotype is that it is impervious to scientific argumentation. A large body of sociolinguistic research has found that Latinos in the United States are shifting to English monolingualism by the third generation, like immigrants in the early 20th century (Rumbaut, Massey, & Bean, 2006). Nevertheless, despite overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary, the stereotype that Latinos refuse to learn English is widespread, as in Huntington's book, and this stereotype is the basis for many policies, practices, and laws at the local, state, and federal government levels. Such stereotypes are racist if they support the political, economic, and social power of English speakers and they limit the power of Latinos. For example, a widely adopted educational practice in the United States is to test Spanish-speaking children in subjects such as social studies and history *in English only*. A major rationale for this practice is that students must be encouraged to use English. Because the students are not given the opportunity to display their knowledge in these subjects in a language they know, they continue to be categorized as low achievers, and they are tracked into vocational education, special education, and low-achiever classrooms at a higher rate than they would be if their knowledge were assessed in Spanish-language tests (see Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). Thus a stereotype about Latinos is the foundation for an educational practice that marginalizes Latino children. In van Dijk's terms, therefore, this educational practice is racist. Class discussion can focus on the connections between racial stereotypes and public policy, law, and practice, and on students' views about racism as a system of social dominance.

A similar stereotype is held about immigrants (especially Latinos) as criminals. There is wide agreement among social scientists that immigration in

the United States lowers crime rates. In fact, the incarceration rate of Mexican, Salvadoran and Guatemalan males 18-30 years of age (the most likely group to illegally enter the United States) is only 1/8 the rate of native-born Latino males who are U.S. citizens, and less than native-born non-Latino white citizens (Rumbaut & Ewing, 2007). In large American cities, neighborhoods with higher proportions of immigrants have significantly lower crime rates, and mid-sized cities with high percentages of immigrants (e.g., border cities in Texas and Arizona) have relatively low rates of crime compared to similar-sized cities with fewer immigrants. These facts are not new: Lower crime rates have been associated with increased immigration since the 19th century. Despite such scientific data, however, in national public opinion polls, approximately three-fourths of Americans believe that immigrants increase the crime rate (Alba, Rumbaut, & Marotz, 2005), and this belief is repeated in many forms of elite discourse. Huntington, for example, links Cuban immigrants with crime: "The Cubanization of Miami coincided with high levels of crime. For each year between 1985 and 1993, Miami ranked within the top three large cities (over 250,000) in violent crime" (Huntington, 2004, p. 250). In a major address to the nation about immigration, President George W. Bush declared in May, 2006, that "illegal immigration . . . brings crime to our communities" (White House, 2006). Newspaper articles and editorials routinely link immigrants with crime (e.g., MacDonald, 2004). Students can easily find examples of such stereotypes in public discourse about immigrants. These examples can be the basis for class analysis and discussion: Precisely what stereotypes are being presented? What laws and public policies are justified with such stereotypes? What alternative representations of minorities are present – or possible – in public discourse?

(b) A second way to use CDA is to focus on elite discourse of current events. How is race represented in public discourse about current events? A particularly rich source of material is the U.S. presidential campaign of 2008. Numerous opportunities for discussion of race and racism are available, including television coverage. For example, on CNN's Cafferty File (September 16, 2008), viewers were asked to respond by email to the question: "Will Barack Obama's race cost him the White House?" Students can be asked how that question differs from the alternative question that could have been asked: "Will white racism cost Barack Obama the White House?" In the first question, Obama's race is represented as the possible "cause" of Obama's defeat, while in the second question the problem is explicitly defined as white racism. An additional question for discussion is why Obama is "black" when one of his

parents (his mother) was "white." The CNN material also includes viewers' responses to the question. One respondent wrote "When over 90% of African-Americans are polled and saying they are voting for Obama, why is there no question as to racism being a possible motive of those voters?" This example raises the issue of "reverse racism," or racism among racial minorities. Implicit in the concept of "reverse racism" is an understanding of racism as a set of beliefs about racial preferences which can be held by any racial group. Moreover, reverse racism is often linked discursively with the idealized notion that ending racism means creating a "colorblind" society. (That is, racial equality means a total disregard of race, an idea that often appears in anti-affirmative action discourse.) What is lacking in this discourse of race is the CDA focus on power: The issue is not merely whether race is a motivation for actions such as voting for a particular candidate. In van Dijk's terms, voting for Obama because he is black is not the same act as voting against him because he is black. Only the second action sustains an unequal social hierarchy of white privilege. Indeed, within the framework of CDA, "reverse racism" is a non-sequitur, and a "colorblind" society is an unattainable ideal that serves to maintain existing social hierarchies and to discourage active measures to rectify social inequality.

(c) A third principle is that CDA in the classroom should focus on discourse samples drawn from different cultural contexts. One possibility is to examine the discourse of immigration in Japan, comparing it to the United States. Students can carry out online searches for politicians' speeches about immigration. For example, in 2003, Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara contributed an essay to the countrywide broadsheet newspaper *Sankei-shinbun*. The essay, titled "Mukashi kentoushi, Ima fufou-nyuukokusya" ("Japanese envoys to Tang Dynasty China in the past, illegal immigrants at present") is an attack against illegal Chinese immigrants and their crimes (see Yamagami, 2004). Similarly, databases for the Japanese Diet include many speeches and debates that focus on immigrants and immigration policies in Japan; many of these texts link immigration with crime, as well as with other public policy concerns such as national security, public education, and Japanese national identity (Yamagami, 2004). Again, students can look for stereotypes and other representations of Japanese, Chinese, and other social groups, focusing on the content of these representations and their use as justifications for public law, policy, and practice.

## Conclusion

Racism is one of the most challenging topics for class discussion. Andrew Hacker, influential author of books about race in the United States (Hacker, 1992) tries to avoid using the words "racism" and "racist" when he speaks at universities: "I've discovered that if I . . . use the word 'racism' or 'racist,' those two six-letter words, the whites in the audience freeze. They don't want to hear [them] . . . [I]t's a strategic matter – never to use the word 'racist' because I can't get across what I want to" (Hacker, 2008).

Given the challenges of talking about race, adopting a scientific approach that focuses on empirical evidence and scientific investigation is appealing, particularly if it leads to the reassuring and "politically correct" conclusion that "race does not exist" and racism is therefore unreasonable and wrong. Yet if we claim that race does not exist, how do we engage with the powerful everyday experiences of racism that are so fundamental to many people's lives? How can we address racism if we discard the concept of race? One possibility is to declare that racism is largely a thing of the past, and that people of color who claim to experience racial discrimination are being overly sensitive. CDA offers a framework for analyzing this possibility by raising questions such as: On what basis can white individuals make statements about the experiences of black people? Who decides whether a claim about one's experience is legitimate? What are the social consequences of white people's belief that they can judge the psychological "sensitivity" of black people (or other racial and ethnic minorities) they do not know? Most importantly, who benefits from this point of view? In seeking answers to such questions, we can apply critical thinking to our own discourses of race.

In discussions of race and in the educational effort to counter racism, what truly matters is not what science says, nor whether people can be educated to not care about race. To stop talking or thinking in racial terms is not the same as achieving racial equality. Indeed, it is possible to create a "colorblind" discourse that sustains and reproduces racial inequality. In such a case, probing the content of the discourse in search of racial stereotypes would not be enough. We must also look critically at what the discourse *does* in the society, and, in turn, what we ourselves do by subscribing to such discourse.

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