



## The Analysis of Discriminatory Discourses against African American in *When They See Us* Movie Series: A Critical Discourse Study

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### Abstract

This study aims to determine (1) the topic of discourse and (2) the discourse strategy of the utterances produced by whites in the *When They See Us* movie series as discriminatory actors to reveal how they voice their ideology when discriminating against blacks in their discourse. The researcher uses qualitative methods because the data is in the form of written texts and also understands the meaning attached by a group to a social problem. In particular, the researcher analyzes the discourse presented in the *When They See Us* movie series which is transcribed into written discourses. This study focuses on how whites describe themselves positively and how whites portray blacks negatively in their discourse based on their beliefs. From the movie series that have been analyzed, the research found 69 data consisting of the presentation of positive-self and negative-others. By using the Van Dijk's ideological square approach, the researcher found 9 discourse topics about what was revealed in the discourse and 13 discourse strategies about how the discourse was expressed.

**Key words:** Discriminatory Discourse, Ideological Square, Discourse Topic, Discourse Strategy.

### A. INTRODUCTION

The field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), according to Van Dijk (2000), is concerned with the study and analysis of written and spoken texts in order to uncover the discursive roots of power abuse, domination, inequality, and prejudice. It investigates how these discursive materials are preserved and reproduced in certain social, political, and historical contexts. In the same way, Paltridge (2006) defines CDA as discourse analysis that focuses on knowledge

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about language beyond the words, clauses, phrases and sentences that are required for effective communication.

CDA is particularly interested in the relationship between language and power (Weiss & Wodak, 2003) because discriminatory practices are usually enacted in language, unequal power relations are constituted and reproduced in language, and social asymmetries may be challenged and transformed in language (Blackledge, 2005). Language in CDA both reflects and recreates power, giving a helpful beginning point for understanding how power is used and exerted. Knowledge, representation, ideas, cultural leadership, and authority are all part of it. In this case, language is more than just a method of communication; it is also a mechanism by which people show their devotion to specific ideologies in one way or another.

CDA has the ability to reveal how social problems such as racial discrimination, racism, and racialization are described in the text or talk using discriminatory discourse strategies. This strategy is used to form a negative representation of others. Those who produce text or talk must always present themselves as positive while others as negative, this can be known as the ‘ideological square’. According to Van Dijk (2006), the ideological square is arranged around a broad strategy that consists of two parts: positive self-presentation and negative others-presentation. It usually highlights the positive aspects of ‘Us’ while disregarding the bad aspects. On the other hand, it disregards the positive aspects of ‘Them’ while emphasizing the bad aspects.

This study will examine discriminatory discourses against minority racial groups, African American, which are represented in movie series. Historically, the relationship between African American and American has been framed around a black-and-white paradigm (Levchak & Levchak, 2020). Henceforth, African American is categorized as black people while American is categorized as white people. Not only about discriminatory, but this research will also examine the topic of the discourse that is created. The meaning of the topic of discourse is what discourse is about. These discourse topics are created using discriminatory discourse strategies such as problematisation, blaming the victims, metaphor, prejudice, negative attribution, labelling mechanism, quotation, the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness, normalisation of prejudice as common knowledge, social demarcation, devaluation or exception of the good characteristics of others, disclaimers, and extensification.

Many researchers have used various methodologies and tools to investigate discrimination against black people from various perspectives. The previous research has discussed black discrimination in the discourse of racism conducted by Wulandari (2017) in 12 Years A Slave movie to find out the types of racism. Another previous research conducted by Ikawati (2018) using Fairclough’s CDA to analyze discrimination against blacks in Hidden Figures movie. There is one previous research that examined the same movie as the present research conducted by Favour (2020), he analyzes *When They See Us* movie using Critical Race Theory (CTR).

Other previous studies discuss discrimination against black in the context of movie conducted by using Sociological approaches (Adam, 2019; Pakaya et al.,

2021; Rambe & Asnani, 2021; Yulinarni et al., 2020). First, Adam (2019) analyzes the The Help movie to find out the type of racism. Second, Rambe & Asnani (2021) examine racial discrimination in the Lincoln movie. Lastly, Yulinarni et al. (2020) classify the types of racism that appear in the Freedom Writers movie.

Moreover, there are several previous research examined racial discrimination case by using Van Dijk's CDA in context of movie and novel (Alviniyanti, 2019; Mahbub et al., 2020; Nurwahyuni & Samelia, 2020). The first is the research conducted by Alviniyanti (2019). She reveals how the characters in the Blackkklansman movie represent elements of racist scenes. The next is the research conducted by Mahbub et al. (2020), they analyze The Help novel to find out the ideological construction of anti-black racism. The last is the research conducted by Nurwahyuni & Samelia (2020), they investigate the Green Book movie to look at the stereotypes and discrimination that the main character faces. These previous researches and the present research both use the CDA approach from Van Dijk. However, the previous researches and the present research use different Van Dijk's approach. These previous researches focused on the dimensions of the text, the dimensions of social cognition, and the dimensions of social context in identifying acts of racism. Meanwhile, in the present study, the Van Dijk's ideological square approach is used.

Based on several previous studies that have been briefly described, it can be seen that there is not a single research that discusses discrimination against black people using Van Dijk's ideological square in the context of the movie. Therefore, this issue still needs to be raised. Moreover, studies that analyze discrimination against blacks are still rare using Van Dijk's ideological square to find out how black people are discriminated against with various discourse strategies made by whites. Van Dijk's ideological square focuses on positive-self representation and negative-others representation. In this case, the researcher will use this approach to reveal how whites present themselves positively and how whites present blacks negatively.

## B. RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative method because this research discusses the issue of discrimination against blacks by analyzing and interpreting movie texts. Creswell & Creswell (2018) state that qualitative research is a method of examining and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups attach to a social or human issue. The movie is the object of this research, thus qualitative method is appropriate, as the term qualitative methodology refers to research that generates descriptive data from people's own written or spoken words, as well as observable behavior (Taylor et al., 2016). The method used is to describe the discriminatory discourse contained in *When They See Us* movie series as a source of data for this research.

The data used in this research is data in spoken form which is taken through the utterances spoken by the characters in *When they See Us* movie series. This movie consists of 4 episodes which each episode has a duration of about 64–88 minutes. The utterances analyzed were only utterances that show positive

representations for whites and negative representations for blacks. The data collection technique was by observation and data collected in the spoken form.

## C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Research Findings

The data analyzed from this research were the utterances of the characters in the *When They See Us* movie series which contains discriminatory discourse against blacks. The utterances in the movie series were analyzed using Van Dijk's ideological square 'positive self-presentation and negative others-presentation'. The researcher has collected 69 data containing positive-self and negative-others strategies. The first analysis was whether the utterances used by the character were positive-self presentation or negative-others presentation. The second analysis was analyzing the discourse topics used in presenting blacks. The last was to analyze with what strategy to present in-group or out-group.

To answer the first research question, the researcher focused on the repetition of information from discourse presentations to make general conclusion when analyzing the discourse topics. Discourse topics are generated through how whites describe themselves positively and how whites describe blacks negatively in their discourse. This discourse topic is about what is being said about blacks generated through negative representations uttered by whites. In this case, the way to identify topics can be done by looking at key words that often appear in utterance productions or marking the most common terms in the form of conclusions as topics based on words that often appear.

To answer the second research question, the researcher used Van Dijk's theory to determine what discourse strategies are used in presenting out-group and in-group presentations. The various strategies they use are aimed at emphasizing the positive part of themselves and de-emphasizing the negative part of themselves. In addition, the strategies they use also aim to emphasize the negative part of blacks and de-emphasize the positive part that blacks have. Several discourse strategies, including as problematisation, blaming the victim, metaphor, scapegoating, disclaimers, and the tactic of quoting or quoted speech, are used to produce these negative others and positive self-presentations.

In this research, the researcher has collected 69 data containing the positive-self and negative-other strategies. The following is a table that demonstrates the amount of data found:

NO	The Episodes of the Movie Series	The link of the Movie Series	Total
1	<i>When They See Us</i> – Part 1	<a href="https://www.netflix.com/watch/80200643?trackId=255824129">https://www.netflix.com/watch/80200643?trackId=255824129</a>	33
2	<i>When They See Us</i> – Part 2	<a href="https://www.netflix.com/watch/80200644?trackId=255875003">https://www.netflix.com/watch/80200644?trackId=255875003</a>	25
3	<i>When They See Us</i> – Part 3	<a href="https://www.netflix.com/watch/80200645?trackId=200257858">https://www.netflix.com/watch/80200645?trackId=200257858</a>	5

4	<i>When They See Us</i> – Part 4	<a href="https://www.netflix.com/watch/80200646?trackId=255824129">https://www.netflix.com/watch/80200646?trackId=255824129</a>	6
Total Data			69

After analyzing the data, the findings reveal that blacks have been discursively discriminated against. The researcher discovered that there are 9 discourse topics for the first research question. The discursive discrimination is created by presenting blacks negatively as, for example, ‘blacks as troublemakers’, ‘blacks are animals’, ‘blacks are rapist’, ‘blacks are liars’, ‘blacks are the suspects’, ‘blacks are wilding’, ‘blacks are guilty’, ‘blacks are poor’, ‘blacks are fuckers’.

For the second research question, the researcher discovered that there are 13 discriminatory discourse strategies used by whites to present blacks negatively and present themselves positively. These strategies are problematisation, blaming the victims, metaphor, prejudice, negative attribution, labeling mechanism, quotation, the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness, normalization of prejudice as common knowledge, social demarcation, devaluation or exception of the good characteristics of others, disclaimers, and extensivisation.

## 2. Discussion

This section presents the discussion based on the findings of the study. It is concerned about how whites present themselves positively and how whites present blacks negatively. The findings reveal that blacks have been discriminated against by whites by emphasizing the negative sides of blacks and ignoring the positive sides of blacks. On the other hand, whites claim to be superior by portraying themselves in very positive ways and ignoring the negative side of them. There are various discriminatory discourses made by whites aimed at blacks by raising several topics in the *When They See Us* movie series. The following are the discourse topics found along with the strategies used:

Blacks as troublemakers, here blacks are considered as the maker of chaos and damage that occurs in society. Whatever the criminal acts that occur will be blamed on the blacks that they are the main cause. There are various discourse strategies used to present that blacks are troublemakers by using strategies such as the strategy of problematisation, extensivisation, the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness, blaming the victim, and normalization of prejudice as common knowledge.

Blacks are animals, here blacks are considered the same as animals who do not use their minds to determine which actions are good and which actions are bad. They are considered to be doing whatever they like even including hurting someone on purpose. There are various discourse strategies used to present that blacks are animals by using strategies such as metaphor and the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness.

Blacks are rapist, here blacks are accused of being perpetrators of rape only on the basis of the prejudice that blacks are criminals and their existence is only to commit crimes. There is no valid evidence to suggest that they committed the rape. The absence of legal justice for them only because of racial discrimination. The

discourse strategy used to present that blacks are rapists by using the strategy of problematisation and the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness.

Blacks are liars, here blacks are accused of being liars only on the basis of the prejudice that their words are just nonsense and need not be believed. The defenses made by blacks regarding their innocence were completely ignored by whites. The discourse strategy used to present that blacks are liars by using the strategy of problematisation, blaming the victims, and the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness.

Blacks are the suspects, here blacks are considered suspects for the rape and assault of a white woman named Patricia Meili in Central Park. They could do nothing about the charges as suspects set against them because of their powerlessness against whites. They could only submit and accept the accusations and violence committed by the whites on them. The discourse strategy used to present that blacks are suspects by using prejudice strategy, extensivisation, and the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness.

Blacks are wilding, here the blacks are considered as a group of people who like to roam in public places to do violence to other people randomly. The violence committed is aimed at having fun with other group members. The discourse strategy used to present that blacks are wilding by using a labeling mechanism, the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness, and existensivisation

Blacks are guilty, here the blacks are believed to be guilty of all charges that have been put against them even though the evidence against them as perpetrators of rape is invalid. This is because America still uses a jury system in its judiciary, which refers to common law. The common law is that the result or decision is determined not by a judge but by a jury as a valid appraiser based on existing evidence and testimony. While the only evidence available is the videotape of each of the five black boys telling false confessions that they were the ones who committed the act of rape and of course it was coercion from the whites to make them pretend in exchange for a promise that they would be released from prison. There are various discourse strategies used to present that blacks are guilty by using strategies such as the strategy of problematisation, the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness, and devaluation or exception of the good characteristics of others.

Blacks are poor, here blacks are considered to have a very low level compared to whites. There is a dividing wall between the two of them where whites claim to be rich and blacks are their enemies. The discourse strategy used to present that blacks are poor by using the strategy of social demarcation or distancing and the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness

Blacks are fuckers, here blacks are labeled as disgusting people because they are considered to have committed an unforgivable act. Whites express their anger by declaring blacks as fuckers which is also accompanied by acts of violence. The discourse strategy used to present that blacks are fuckers by using negative attribution and blaming the victim strategies.

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that one discourse topic can be represented through several discourse strategies. The majority who have complete power over the minorities lead to their freedom to make various

discriminatory discourses so that the minorities look worse. As a result of discourses that are labeled to blacks, it leads to legal injustice that makes people who are innocent then become guilty and imprisoned.

#### **D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

*When They See Us* movie series is a movie that tells a true story that shows the acts of racism lead to legal injustice. Whites consider themselves to be superior to blacks. This perception makes whites to act arbitrarily towards blacks. Various kinds of verbal and non-verbal violence are often accepted by blacks just because of the difference in skin color. Racism is an action that has no end because racism arises from the negative prejudices of whites towards blacks. As long as negative thoughts about blacks are still strong in the minds of society, it will be difficult to eliminate racism. The negative thoughts of whites expressed in the form of utterances against blacks have been analyzed through this research.

Based on research analysis on how whites represent blacks and how whites represent themselves, it can be concluded that whites represent blacks as troublemakers where blacks are considered as criminals who always create chaos in society; blacks are animals because of their similar characteristics; blacks are rapist for allegedly raping a white woman; blacks are liars because they do not admit the crimes committed; blacks as the suspects because it has become prejudice that all bad behavior is on blacks; blacks are wilding because they gather to attack others in a public place; blacks are guilty because they are considered to have committed a crime; blacks are poor because they are considered not to have the skills to change lives; blacks are fuckers because they are considered disgusting for the unforgivable deeds they do. Therefore, it was found that there were 9 discourse topics regarding blacks represented by whites.

To present the positive-self and negative-others in discriminatory discourse, whites used various discriminatory discourse strategies. In this research, it was found that there were 13 strategies used including: problematisation, blaming the victims, metaphor, prejudice, negative attribution, labeling mechanism, quotation, the use of personal pronouns to show indirectness, normalization of prejudice as common knowledge, social demarcation, devaluation or exception of the good characteristics of others, disclaimers, and extensivisation.

Since this research has focused on how whites discriminate against blacks in movie (Discriminatory Discourse), it is recommended for future research to look at it from a different perspective, such as how blacks try to fight and defend themselves against the discrimination they have experienced (Resistance Discourse).

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