



Accusatory and exculpatory moves in the hunting for “Racists” language game



Adam Hodges

Carnegie Mellon University, 5032 Forbes Avenue SMC 1070, Pittsburgh, PA 15289, United States

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ABSTRACT

Race talk in the US frequently singles out individuals as “racists,” positioning them as outliers in a society that has supposedly moved beyond race. However, this type of “language game” is premised upon a narrow understanding of racism that reduces it to individual bigotry while ignoring its systemic dimensions. This article examines the accusatory and exculpatory moves in this language game by analyzing three cases that received mainstream media attention. The analysis shows that the discursive moves ultimately work to reproduce dominant ideological assumptions, doing more to protect white privilege than to dismantle racism. This occurs even as speakers engage in ostensibly anti-racist talk.

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1. Introduction

In US society, public discourse about racism in the mainstream media comes to the fore after the occurrence of what Doane (2006) terms a “racial event.” Racial events are “occurrences whose racialized character triggers extensive public discussion and consideration of racial issues” (259). What is interesting about contemporary racial discourse after such events is the presence of a widespread consensus that the type of overt discrimination and bigotry indicative of the Jim Crow era is unacceptable and immoral. However, along with the widespread denouncement of such forms of racism comes a widespread belief that racism has supposedly declined in significance (Feagin, 2010: 14). Yet, as widely recognized by minorities and race scholars, racism continues to structure US society at an individual and institutional level. Racism has not disappeared, it has simply become less overt and more subtle than the more recognizable forms of Jim Crow racism of the past. The shape of today’s “systemic racism” (Feagin, 2006) is driven by a “colorblind” ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) that continues to rationalize racial inequality.

Language plays a central role in perpetuating today’s racism (Van Dijk, 1987, 1992; Hill, 1998; Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Barrett, 2006; Alim and Reyes, 2011; Koven, 2013; Yamaguchi, 2013) and racializing practices (Bucholtz and Trechter, 2001; Pagliai, 2009; Dick and Wirtz, 2011; Roth-Gordon, 2011, 2012). Moreover, language itself is often featured at the center of racial events that involve, for example, racist remarks and racial slurs (Hill, 2008; Croom, 2013). It is through the discourse that ensues after such racial events that understandings about race and racism are articulated and rearticulated. In this process, speakers in the mainstream media draw from presupposed understandings of what racism means as they attempt to make sense of the incidents. However, those presupposed understandings rely heavily upon dominant ideological assumptions that further rationalize the current racial structure. In other words, understandings of racism pass through the discourse with little critical inspection and end up reproducing “common sense” ideas that reduce racism to individual acts of bigotry while erasing its collective and systemic dimensions. Crucially, this occurs even as speakers engage in talk about racism that ostensibly denounces acts of bigotry (Hill, 2009).

E-mail addresses: adamhodges@cmu.edu, adam.hodges@colorado.edu.

In this paper, I explore a form of talk about racism that I refer to as the *hunting for “racists” language game*. I draw from [Bonilla-Silva’s \(2013\)](#) use of the “hunting for ‘racists’” metaphor, which he uses to describe how the common approach to race relations often centers on “the careful separation of good and bad, tolerant and intolerant Americans” (15). Furthermore, I draw from [Wittgenstein’s \(2001 \[1953\]\)](#) notion of a “language game,” which emphasizes the way a word can take on different meanings depending upon the activity in which it is embedded. As a routine subset of US racial discourse—particularly in response to events that involve racial slurs or racist remarks—the hunting for “racists” language game involves a discursive exercise whereby individuals are accused or absolved of being “racists.” To play the hunting for “racists” language game, speakers necessarily rely upon a narrow meaning of *racism* grounded in assumptions forwarded by the dominant ideological perspective. This perspective, which is well captured by [Hill \(2008\)](#) in her description of the “folk theory of race and racism,” as well as by [Bonilla-Silva \(2013\)](#) in his discussion of colorblind racism, defines racism solely in individualist terms, ignoring the way racism operates as a collective system of power that continues to structure US society around white privilege.

In the analysis, I explore how the hunting for “racists” language game unfolds discursively across multiple sites of interaction. The discourse data I examine come from three high-profile cases in recent years where mainstream media discourse has focused on allegations of slurs or racist remarks uttered by figures in the public spotlight. These include the case of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watchman in Florida who killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager, in 2012. In the recording of a 911 call Zimmerman made before he pursued and eventually killed Martin, there was intense media speculation on whether he could be heard uttering a racial slur ([Hodges, forthcoming](#)). My analysis examines the way his supporters countered the allegation that Zimmerman was a “racist” through the use of “small stories” ([Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008](#)) as argumentative devices. The two other cases involve Donald Sterling, then-owner of the LA Clippers NBA team, and Cliven Bundy, a Nevada rancher involved in a dispute with the federal government over his refusal to pay grazing fees while using public lands. Both Sterling and Bundy uttered remarks around the same time in 2014 that became the center of media attention. However, their cases differed from Zimmerman’s in important ways. Not only was Zimmerman implicated in the shooting death of an innocent individual, but the evidence of his alleged use of a racial slur was inconclusive. In contrast, both Sterling and Bundy indubitably spoke the remarks attributed to them, and those remarks themselves sparked the ensuing racial events. Moreover, as the analysis examines, many of the same voices who defended Zimmerman within the hunting for “racists” language game played the accusatory role with Sterling and Bundy. Bundy’s case is particularly interesting in that he was receiving vocal and enthusiastic support from many of those same voices up to the point he made his remarks.

In the next section, I provide further background on the ideologies of race and language that undergird the hunting for “racists” language game; I also provide more details on the three cases examined in the analysis. The analysis then involves two parts with each part focusing on one side of the either/or binary set up by the language game. The first part analyzes the exculpatory moves in the game, and the second part analyzes the accusatory moves. Finally, I conclude by discussing the differences between the cases and the broader implications for public discourse about racism. My main claim is that the hunting for “racists” language game, including the various discursive moves that contribute to the game, ultimately works to reproduce dominant ideological assumptions about racism; and the end result is to protect white privilege rather than to dismantle racism.

2. The hunting for “Racists” language game

The hunting for “racists” language game arises from assumptions associated with the dominant racial ideology in US society. This ideology encompasses “the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify” the racial status quo ([Bonilla-Silva, 2013: 9](#)). These frameworks are well represented in what [Hill \(2008\)](#) terms the “folk theory of race and racism.” As [Hill \(2008\)](#) describes, a central tenet of this ideological framework is the reduction of the meaning of racism to individual bigotry or racially motivated animus. In other words, “the folk theory holds that racism is entirely a matter of individual beliefs, intentions, and actions” ([Hill, 2008: 6](#)). As a result, racial discourse can easily become “snarled in the prejudice problematic” whereby racism comes to be primarily understood as “individual psychological dispositions” ([Bonilla-Silva, 2013: 7](#)) rather than as a social system supported by collective actions. “Systemic racism” ([Feagin, 2006](#)) is therefore ignored or erased from view, including its deep-seated institutional dimensions as well as the “implicit racial biases (which often exist side-by-side with an outwardly non-racist demeanor and persona) [that] frequently influence the way we view and treat others” ([Wise, 2010: v](#)). Such biases, as research by social psychologists has shown ([Eberhardt et al. 2004, inter alia](#)), structure everyday interactions that contribute to the collective reenactment of racism as a system of power based upon white privilege. In discourse shaped by the assumptions of the dominant ideology, these critical understandings of the workings of racism are elided from the discourse. Instead, the discourse focuses sharply on the overt and visible actions of individuals who can be singled out as “racists.” Since the dominant ideology minimizes racism ([Bonilla-Silva, 2013](#)), such individuals are viewed as exceptions in a society that has supposedly moved beyond racism ([Hill, 2008: 6](#)).

Language itself becomes a prominent way “racists” are identified within the hunting for “racists” language game. Given the focus on defining racism solely in terms of individual actions, words attributed to an individual (e.g. slurs, epithets, racist remarks) become valuable forms of evidence. The evidentiary focus on words is supported by the language ideology of personalism ([Rosaldo, 1982](#); see also, [Duranti, 1993](#); [Hill, 2000, 2008](#)); and, to a lesser extent, the language ideology of referentialism ([Silverstein, 1976](#)). As sets of beliefs about language ([Silverstein, 1979](#); [Kroskrity, 2004](#); [Bucholtz and Hall, 2008](#)), these language ideologies work in tandem with the dominant racial ideology. Since personalism matches words to an individual’s beliefs and intentions, it aids the racial ideology’s interest in locating racism within an individual’s psyche. The words themselves act as conduits ([Reddy, 1979](#)) of meaning that provide that window into an individual’s beliefs and

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