

Discourse Analysis of Racism in *Just Mercy* Movie

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Abstract

This research aims to describe the racist utterances in the *Just Mercy* movie using racism theory based on Dijk's approach. The researcher used qualitative descriptive research as a method. The data source in this research was taken from the *Just Mercy* movie. Data collection was done through watching, note-taking, screening, identifying, and grouping the data based on the theory of racism based on Dijk's approach. Data analysis techniques present, describe, interpret, and analyze the data resulting from this research. The research results show that racist behavior in the *Just Mercy* movie is depicted based on Dijk's theory in the aspects of nonverbal structures, sounds, syntax, lexicon, local (sentence) meaning, global discourse meaning (topics), schema (conventional forms of global discourse organization), rhetorical devices, speech acts, and interaction. This aspect shows racist actions in the form of facial expressions, voice, speech, actions, and use of language styles. Racism in this research then provides an accurate picture of racist behavior towards black people as a reflection of the existing system of prejudice and stereotypes. As a result of the analysis, the researcher found that the movie had elements of racism in which Bryan Stevenson became a victim of racism. The researchers found seven pieces of data. Therefore, racial discrimination can also be seen in language discourse. Language also plays a vital role in forming and maintaining the ideology of racism.

Keywords: *just mercy, prejudice, racism, stereotype*

INTRODUCTION

Every human being has different physical characteristics for each individual, such as face shape, nose, skin color, and so on. They also have various social backgrounds, including race, ethnicity, and culture. These differences can trigger racist behavior in society. Schaefer (2013) described a racial group as “a group that is set apart from others because of physical differences that have taken on social significance.” The differences create a myth of racial identity in which one group claims itself as superior to the other; one is better than others within the ideology of racism. Racism is an ideological construct that assigns a certain race and ethnic group to a position of power over others based on physical and cultural attributes, as well as economic wealth, involving hierarchical relations where the ‘superior’ race exercises domination and control over others (OHCHR and UNESCO, 2005). Racist behavior arises because there are superior groups who feel they are better than inferior groups. According to Marger (1994), racism arises because there is a race,

group, tribe, or black community that has or is at a lower social level compared to the race, group, tribe, or white people. Racist thinking affects the natural basis of thought and action to give different treatment to each member of a race that is different from other races. Racism is associated with a framework that is used to differentiate superior groups from others for any reason and to label it to justify the oppression of lower groups. Language has a big power to spread thoughts through discourse in literature and other cultures. Dijk (1997) defined discourse as a particular communication event and a written or spoken form of language interaction. Discourses are also like "words" but texts and speech play an important role in producing modern racism. Racism aside from maintaining the characteristics of this type of discriminatory culture is also to explain how ethnic and ideological prejudices are expressed and conveyed in society. This research focus on the discourse analysis of racism that appears in the main characters in *Just Mercy* movie according to the aspects proposed by Van Dijk (1997) such as local (sentence) meaning, other scholars focus the discussion in a different direction in expressing racism, like racism in mere ideology or other types of power without going through the process of racism in language discourse. The language plays an important role in shaping and maintaining the ideology of racism through stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. The reason researchers use discourse analysis of racism is because aspects of the racism process are caused racist actions that befell Stevenson, which includes aspect nonverbal structure, sounds, syntax, lexicon, local (sentence) meaning, global discourse meaning (topics), schema, rhetorical devices, speech acts, and interaction based on Van Dijk's (1997) theory.

The importance of this research is to describe how the discourse of racism is expressed in the *Just Mercy* movie. On the other hand, the researcher also wants to describe how the acts of racism in the *Just Mercy* movie are by the aspects proposed by Van Dijk. This research is also considered important because acts of racism are still very rampant in society.

This research complements previous research that has been studied, such as "Representation of Racism in the Green Book Movie: A Critical Discourse Analysis" by Arifin (2022), and "Racist Discourse in Loving Movie" by Habit (2022). Another research is "Representation of The Resistance Values toward Racism: Critical Discourse Analysis" by Hidayat (2021). This research aims to complement aspects of racism in the film *Just Mercy*, which have not been examined in previous research.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research includes library research and will use descriptive qualitative methods. Magilvy (2003) defines qualitative research as inquiry in natural settings, exploratory research from everyday life experiences in the world. On the other hand, library research is a structured form of inquiry with specific tools, rules and techniques. The aim of qualitative research is “to generate rich descriptions and deep understanding of phenomena of interest, cultures or people’s live experiences in natural settings”. In doing so, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of how their social life functions and why things happen. Therefore, analyzing racism in the Just Mercy movie is part of this type of research and works with a qualitative descriptive method, because the analysis will involve bibliographical data and descriptive qualitative analysis. The data in this research is specifically focused on the research object, where the researcher has analyzed the racism used in the Just Mercy movie, which is identified by several rules, namely, nonverbal structure, sounds, syntax, lexicon, local (sentence) meaning, global discourse meaning (topics), schema, rhetorical devices, speech acts, and interaction based on Van Dijk's (1997) theory.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the data analysis used to answer the research questions posed in Chapter One. This research aims to describe racist speech in the Just Mercy movie. All research questions are expected to be answered in data analysis based on Dijk's (1997) analysis of racism. This section explains in detail the findings from the study of racist cases in the Just Mercy movie, which will be presented qualitatively.

Discourse Analysis of Racism

The purpose of this section is to present the results and discuss research findings that aim to answer this research question: How are Racism utterances in Just Mercy movies based on Van Dijk's theory. The data source in this research, namely the film Just Mercy by Destin Daniel Cretton, was analyzed using racism theory which is explained in the aspects of nonverbal structures, sounds, syntax, lexicon, local (sentence) meaning, global discourse meaning (topics), schema (conventional forms of global discourse organization), rhetorical devices, speech acts, and interaction. The data presented below is based on aspects of nonverbal structures, sounds, syntax, lexicon, local (sentence) meaning, global discourse

meaning (topics), schema (conventional forms of global discourse organization), rhetorical devices, speech acts, and interaction.

Nonverbal Structure



Picture 1. *The highway in Alabama*
0:57:526 – 0:57:35

Bryan: *"I have nothing in my hands*
Police: *"Turn around, **hands on the car!***
"

The image above depicts the police patrolling the area, so Bryan, who is a black man passing through the area, had to be stopped and checked. The white police officer looked annoyed when Bryan, who was forced to get out of his car, questioned the reason why he was stopped. Then Bryan was treated roughly, pushing Bryan towards the car and letting the police search his vehicle. Based on the presentation of the data above, the researcher concluded that the facial expression shown by the police was annoyed and displeased, followed by the police pushing Bryan roughly and saying, *"Hands on the car!"* It falls into the category of racism because, seeing Bryan was a black driver, the white police thought that Bryan would do bad things because he was black. This racism act is included in the Nonverbal-Structure aspect because it describes movements synchronized with speech to show racism expressions or attitudes, and this is reflected through body language and facial expressions displayed.

Sound



Picture 2. *Baldwin County Courthouse*
1:57:57 – 1:57:59

Bryan : *"Excuse me, what are you doing?"*.
Police : *"Just following orders"*.

The conversation in the image above took place at the Baldwin County Courthouse building, where black residents had to stand outside the courtroom for approximately an hour. Tom Tate ordered the police to prevent black residents from entering the room. After approximately an hour, the courtroom was full of white people, and Bryan came to address the problem and asked why the black people had to wait outside the room. Bryan said, *"Excuse me, what are you doing?"* the police said, *"Just following' orders"*, When talking to Bryan he used a different intonation which seemed dismissive. Based on the explanation above, the researcher identified speech delivered by police with a dismissive voice and different intonation, including racist actions, in terms of sound. Differences in votes also determine the existence of racist traits shown by white people towards black people who are arbitrary in any case because they are stronger and superior. Discrimination against black people is not only shown through prejudice against black people, oppression, humiliation, segregation, and so on. However, racist behavior can also be seen in small things, such as differences in volume and intonation when talking to black people and white people.



Picture 3. *Police Station*
0:55:57 – 0:56:10

Bryan : *"They should be dropped immediately"*.
Sheriff Tate : *"Okay, is that okay with you, Tommy?"*
Tommy : *"Sure. It doesn't matter"*.

The conversation took place at the police station. Bryan came to the police station to free Darnel, who was willing to testify on charges of murdering Johnny D. Darnel had to be arrested by the police on charges of perjury. Bryan, who argued with Tate because the accusations against Johnny D were based on witnesses from white people, did not accept

the arrest of his witnesses because he had always accepted different behavior towards black people. *"They should be dropped immediately"*. The police said in a flat, dismissive intonation, *"Okay, is that okay with you, Tommy?"* Tommy, who was also in the room, answered in a dismissive tone, *"Sure. It doesn't really matter."* When talking to Bryan his voice became flatter but seemed dismissive. Based on the explanation above, the researcher concluded that Tate and Tommy's behavior when speaking to Bryan in a dismissive voice was considered racist in terms of sound. Tate realized that he was superior to black people and had the power to do anything. In this racist discourse, white people are always permanently attached to prejudice against black people. People made it clear that there was inequality, oppression, and degrading treatment because Bryan was black.

Syntax



Picture 4. *William C. Holman Correctional Facility*
00:16:05 – 00:16:07

Police : *"Gonna have to search you, just go in that room there and take everything off."*
Bryan : *"Attorneys aren't strip-searched for legal visits."*
Police : *"You ain't gonna visit shit unless you get in that room and strip."*

The image above depicts the situation when Bryan, a black lawyer, was asking the police for permission to visit suspected prisoners. The policeman on duty said that if he wanted to visit the prisoners, he had to be searched first and told Bryan to go to a room that had been indicated by the police. Bryan feels confused because the lawyer shouldn't be questioned; the police say, *"You ain't gonna visit shit unless you get in that room and strip."* Based on the explanation above, the speech delivered by the police to Bryan was a racist act in the form of an arrangement of words and phrases to form a sentence delivered to a black person. In this case, the sentences emphasize responsibility and give orders to the black party. The sentence delivered by the police *"You ain't gonna visit shit unless you get in that*

room and strip." This sentence clearly emphasizes the order to go to a room to be searched. The oppression in this data shows that white people have power; they order black people to do anything, and this racist treatment is included in the syntax aspect.

Global Discourse Meaning



Picture 5. *Baldwin County Courthouse*
01:41:03 – 01:41:09

The above depicts the trial situation of Johnny D and Bryan as his lawyer. Johnny D's biological son, Jhon, did not accept the judge's decision to still sentence his father to death. The white police came to arrest John with very rough actions. The white police, right in front of the black people, showed a very annoyed attitude toward John. Based on the explanation above, the researcher identified that the picture shows racist acts in the Global Discourse Meaning (themes) aspect, which in this aspect explains the form of racism in question, namely how white people emphasize negative topics towards those with black skin and depict that they (black people) always do bad things.



Picture 6. *Baldwin County Courthouse*
01:29:59 – 01:30:01 & 01:59:57 – 01:59:59

The image above shows the trial situation in the same room at different times. In these two trials, the judge presiding over the trial was always white, where black people were not allowed to be judges. Based on the explanation above, the researcher identified racist acts in the Global Discourse Meaning (themes) aspect which emphasizes positive topics such as the courts; This happens among white people to show how they (white people) always try to be the first in terms of justice.

Schemata



Picture 7. *William C. Holman Correctional Facility*
00:15:44 – 00:15:57

Police : " *I ain't seen you before.*"
Bryan : " *It's because I just moved here.*"
Police : " *You really a lawyer?*"
Bryan : " *Yes i am.*"

The image above took place at the William C. Holman Correctional Facility when Bryan came to visit the inmates. The police who were examining Bryan's files seemed doubtful that he was a lawyer. The police said, "You are really a lawyer?" The policeman seemed unsure that Bryan was a lawyer. Based on the description given above, the researcher concluded that the police's behavior when they first met Bryan displayed racist actions in the schemata component. Racist discourse contains schemata because racist police behavior shows that the general understanding of white people is that black people are people of the lowest position, outcasts, troublemakers and stupid. When he saw Bryan, the police's thoughts automatically turned to the fact that Bryan was a regular prisoner visitor or ordinary citizen and not a lawyer because he was black. Based on the findings above, it can be seen that the Just Mercy movie contains racist aspects such as Nonverbal Structure, Sound, Syntax, Global Discourse Meaning (Themes), and Schemata. Meanwhile, other

aspects such as Lexicon, Local Sentence-Meaning, Rhetorical Devices, Speech Acts, and Interaction were not found in this movie.

In this research, aspects that have been found in the *Just Mercy* movie include Nonverbal Structure, which has been described in data 1. In general, racist actions that are categorized as Nonverbal Structure are expressions conveyed by someone with facial expressions of annoyance, dislike and arrogance and followed by movements such as pushing, throwing and so on by Van Dijk's theory (1997). This is also by the results described in data 1, namely that there are speeches delivered and synchronized with movements to show racist behavior. Racist behavior included in the Sound aspect is speech delivered with different intonations such as a high voice that is dismissive of minority groups by Van Dijk's (1997) theory. This is also in line with the data written by the researcher, the racist aspect of the voice is depicted in data 2 and 3.

In racism, syntax functions to indicate the sentences conveyed to them, such as sentences that emphasize responsibility and order in active and passive forms. This aspect is in line with what was found by the researcher which is included in data 4 by Dijk's (1997) theory. Global Discourse Meaning (Themes) generally emphasizes positive topics carried out by white people in terms of goodness, power and justice that they are superior in these matters. White people also emphasize negative topics on black people that they will always do bad things. In the *Just Mercy* movie, researchers found this aspect listed in data 5 and 6.

Schemata are cognitive structures that represent general knowledge, namely structures that do not contain information about specific entities, events or occurrences, but rather about their general form. such as resolution in a story scheme or conclusion in an argument scheme. it's to see how They emphasize Our Good Things (White People) and Other Bad Things (Black People). The schemata in the *Just Mercy* movie is depicted in data 7, that white people always think that black people are the people with the lowest status, troublemakers, stupid, and outcasts.

Based on the research results, the Sound and Global Discourse Meaning aspects are the aspects that are more dominantly depicted by the characters in the objects. These two aspects show racist actions carried out in the form of intonation, racist actions in the form of thoughts, emotions and hidden meanings of "race" as well as utterances that can unconsciously trigger racist actions. Other aspects such as Nonverbal Structure, syntax and Schemata is also the main cause of racist actions in the *Just Mercy* movie. From the

research results, it can be seen that almost every character, especially white people in the Just Mercy movie, depicts acts of racism.

This research also reveals how black people experience negative attitudes. Based on the findings above, black people really have a positive side. From a legal perspective, black people who are not proven guilty without a trial have been sentenced to death. A negative attitude towards society, groups or beliefs is a characteristic of prejudice.

Exploring the concept of race is important. In addition to arousing intellectual curiosity regarding the meaning of racial language, these meanings can imply the difference between life and death for individuals. One of the most pressing issues of the day was whether race should be eradicated or maintained in public discourse and behavior. This normative question is often only partially resolved, if it is an illusion it must be eradicated; if it is original then it must be preserved. After reviewing the Discourse Analysis of Racism in Just Mercy Movie, this statement was later refuted; Racist behavior such as racial discrimination, legal injustice and oppression of black people must be eliminated so that equality can be realized in a society where everyone is free to express their rights and opinions. It's no longer a matter of who is the strongest and who is the weakest.

Racism is a form of discriminatory social behavior expressed through writing, speech and communication. Racism regarding other (nonverbal) discriminatory actions perpetuates racism as ethnic or "racial" domination. Dialogue is often considered unimportant because "words" cannot harm anyone. Instead, text and speech play a crucial role in the replication of modern racism. So this research aims to describe the racism utterances in the Just Mercy Movie in terms of nonverbal structures, sounds, syntax, lexicon, local (sentence) meaning, global discourse meaning (topics), schema (conventional forms of global discourse organization), rhetorical devices, speech acts, and interaction, using Dijk's (1997) approach.

From the explanation above, the reader can conclude that understanding acts of racism is one of the most important things because individuals or groups sometimes do not realize that the actions they commit are acts of racism in the form of language.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and discussion above, the researcher draws conclusions related to the research question about How are Racism utterances in Just Mercy Movie based on Van Dijk theory Based on data analysis, researchers found that racism in Just Mercy is depicted through Nonverbal Structure in the form of facial expressions synchronized with movements, Sound in the form of intonation, Syntax in the form of imperative sentences that emphasize responsibility, Lexicon in the form of expressions that indicate negative words for black people, Local Meaning (Sentence) in the form of ambiguous words or words indirectly about racism, Global Discourse Meaning (themes) in the form of positive topics emphasized by white people in terms of goodness, Schemata in the form of cognitive structures that represent general knowledge. organization), Rhetorical Devices in the form of language are used by speakers to evoke an emotional response from the audience through the use of language such as metaphors, and Speech Acts in the form of the use of language conveyed to demean other people. and Interaction in the form of actions between each other using the Dijk (1997) approach. Based on these findings, sound and Global Discourse meaning (Themes) are the more prominent components that show racist behavior and racial dominance in the form of thoughts, facial expressions and speech. Other aspects such as Nonverbal Structure, syntax and Schemata show racism in the form of speech, as well as hidden meanings that contain racism.

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