

Subtle racism in English language: A socio-semiotic analysis of black-prefixed English lexicons

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ABSTRACT

The English language has become a global language and as such, it is expected to be devoid of racial discrimination and prejudice. The English language has both verbal and non-verbal systems of communication which often requires semantic and semiotic analyses for the purpose of generating meaning. Most English words with the prefix 'black' have meanings that are either connotative or derogative. Using Jakobson's transmutation theory, the study establishes the relationship between colour, culture, and racial prejudice in English language black-prefixed lexicons. This is a subtle form of racism when such words are taught in schools. The design adopted for this research was a qualitative, and no variables were manipulated because it was a library research. The study examined the socio-semiotics elements of black-prefixed words in the English language to establish that there is subtle racism in English expressions used and taught in schools. It was concluded that instruction in the language should be revitalized to eradicate racism of any form, especially in the second language classroom.

Keywords: *Racism; Transmutation; Semiotics; Black-prefixed-words; English lexicons*

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1. Introduction

The English language is unarguably one of the most powerful languages in the world because it has evolved from being the language of a country or region to a global language. Lyons (2017) puts the estimate of people who use the English language either as the first language (mother tongue), official language, or foreign language at approximately 1.5 billion which constitute 20% of the Earth's population. Also, through the metamorphosis in form of slave trade, commerce, colonialism, religion, education and globalization, the English language is spoken beyond the shores of the United Kingdom and America across all the continents and racial demarcations. For example, in Anglophone West Africa, English is used as the official language, language of instruction and a core subject taught in schools. The implication of this is that all the students in these West African countries and by extension, all the Commonwealth States are exposed to the English language as the language of instruction or an important school subject.

Notably, a language with such immense spread, enormous responsibility and power should be devoid of racial sentiments. However, there are several racial inclined lexicons in the English language diction used in formal and informal setting and this continues to project subtle yet systemic racism in English language classrooms across the globe. In its strict sense, racism is a form of prejudice borne out of the belief that a particular race possesses certain qualities, characteristics, or abilities, which distinguishes it as inferior or superior to another. Also, racial prejudice creates a basis for intolerance, discrimination, or bigotry often directed against individuals or groups. The prevalence of racism or racial prejudice particularly against Africans across the globe can no longer be denied because it has become part of their daily experiences in politics, justice system, sports, and education. For example, in the justice system, racism occurs in form of police brutality, massive raids and unlawful arrests of African Americans and other Africans in the Diaspora. The killing of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, in the United States in June 2020 and the resultant global protests/campaigns against racism further show the nature and extent of the problem.

Other forms of systemic racism are subtle but propagated through English language education across the world. According to Watts-Jones (2004), racism exists in many everyday English expressions. For example, the continued teaching or use of certain lexicons with racial sentiments, mostly words formed with the prefix 'black' in the English language classroom, is a propagation of racism. The word 'black' has a racial colouration to it and this is a form of subtle yet systemic racism in the English language. Almalech and Habil (2014) describe colour as visual or natural language signs with unique capacity to be a cultural unit to be treated as a language or part of a communicative system. In other words, colours are culture-based and they can be used to communicate. This suggests that the use of the colour 'black' as a prefix to another word has an undertone both in semantic and semiotic nuances. The meaning of the

prefix 'black' is metaphorical, cultural and racial because it attaches a discriminatory meaning to whatever word it is used with.

Socio-semiotic analysis of lexicon items suggests that the use of selected images, symbols or colours with words in language and expression is not often accidental because they can be interpreted or consistently translated as metaphorical or cultural non-verbal objects. Jakobson (2004) cited in Kourdis (2014) describes the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal systems as inter-semiotic translation or transmutation. Colours are codes with implied meanings that differ from one society to another. Therefore, the choice of colour in language use is meaningful and defined by social conventions. For example, colour 'white' represents purity while 'red' means danger among the indigenous Yoruba speaking tribe in West Africa. By convention, black has become a word or colour that is used to refer to Africans or Afro-Americans over the years. Similarly, colour 'black' is a prefix that is commonly used with other words in English language to alter or bring a fresh perspective to the meaning of the word.

Some of the examples of English words with the prefix 'black' include blackmail, blacklist, blackout, blackboard, black-death, black economy, black amoor, black eye, black face, black sheep, black magic, black head, black hole, black lung, black mark, black spot, black market, black mass, black Muslim, black widow. The list above cannot be exhausted; however, when semantics is considered, all the words have derogatory and prejudiced meanings. Considering the transmutation socio-semiotic theory as presented by Jakobson, such consistent occurrences cannot be said to be accidental. The choice of the prefix 'black' with the words are not only intentional, they are racial.

Language operates within the society and that relationship between language use and cultural symbols or objects like colours and images cannot be overemphasized. According to Kourdis (2014), the socio-semiotic point of view suggests that culture cannot be divorced from the meaning of words within a speech community. To fully understand the meaning of words and expressions, cultural relevance of symbols, images or colours should be thoroughly analysed. Kourdis (2014) submits that an inter-semiotic translator from source to target language should be a cultural mediator with ample socio-cultural knowledge especially when the target text has a colour.

The study adopted a qualitative approach to examine and analyze the different forms of subtle racism in the use of English language, especially with regards to the black-prefixed lexicons. Therefore, this study analyzed the socio-semiotic properties of the selected English words with the prefix 'black' to ascertain if such words have racial colourations.

2. Theoretical framework: Jakobson's transmutation theory

The transmutation theory as proposed by Jakobson (2004) underpins this study. Jakobson's concern was the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-

verbal systems and the theory establishes the use of non-verbal symbols such as texture, form or colour to convey message(s). The intersemiotic theorists argue that iconic signs like colours constitute an autonomous representation or meaning which are culture-related (Groupe μ , 1995). Almalech and Habil (2014) describe colours as metaphors that constitute semiotic challenges in the process of translation because of diversity in culture. However, interpretations in non-verbal form of language are often both product of culture and semiotics (Kourdis, 2014). Colour plays a significant role in the generation of meaning from verbal or non-verbal channels of communication. Conventionally, the use of colour 'black' has been 'transmuted' to have several semiotic connotations such as sadness, mourning, racism and so on. This study examines both the cultural and semiotic elements behind of the use of colour 'black' as prefix in selected English words using socio-semiotic analysis to establish if their meanings are denotative or derogatory.

Jakobson as cited in Dusi (2015) projected his ideas of transformation and adaption in the interpretation of non-verbal signs to verbal signs by expanding the concept into three categories namely: Intralingual translation (rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language). Interlingual translation (translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language). Intersemiotic translation (transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems). Transmutation theory establishes the interrelationship between all semiotic systems and not just the linguistic one, for example in the intersemiotic transmutations or translations between cinema and theatre (Dusi, 2015). The transmutation theory explains that images, textures or colours can be effectively interpreted and assigned meanings that are beyond the linguistic or denotative sense.

The theorists argued that the interpretation of colours and other symbols fall into the category of intersemiotic translations or transmutations because the use or choice of colours, images and symbols is not often by accidentally or in isolation because every colour or image has an underlying meaning or expression beyond words attached to symbols, images and colours in most cases. The theory suggests that an understanding of the intersemiotic processes or properties of a colour or image, and the concept of transmutation helps in the comprehensive interpretation of a text. Therefore, this is the basis for the choice of the theory in this study.

3. Socio-semiotic elements and racial colouration in English language lexicons

Colour refers to the property possessed by an object which allows it to produce sight-sensitive sensations when it is exposed to light (Darrodi, 2012). Colours are subject to visual perceptions and interpretation after exposure to light or illumination. All forms of colours have conventional meanings that are mostly religious, societal and culturally-related. Al-Shraideh and El-Sharif (2019) observe that colours could have psychological effects, either positive or negative, on people. For example, colour 'red'

stands for love/passion, green for nature and blue for serenity. Similarly, Kenney (2005) describes colour as an expression of an individual's personal inner experience of the external, physical and symbolic world. Certain colours have been assigned universal meanings, which affect people's ideologies, perceptions, beliefs, thoughts and messages. Notably, colour 'white' is universally perceived or accepted to represent holiness, godly, purity or good, while 'black' is seen as the direct opposite of 'white'.

The semiotic properties of colour deal with meaning association between colours and words by cultural or linguistic society. Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo (2017) aver that the word 'black' is often used with racial colouration to describe a category of people either assigned 'blackness' due to their phenotype or connections with Africa with a shared diversity of black experiences and black subjectivities. Although colours have meanings that are influenced by cultural orientations and socio-semiotics consciousness of the language users, the colour 'black' is often used to indicate racial prejudice or discrimination, especially in language. There is a strong relationship between culture and language use, and this has been established in different studies (Torop, 2002; 2008). Semiotics plays an integral role in the interaction between culture and translation or interpretation of words during the process of communication. Effectiveness in the interpretation or translation of any language cuts across the socio-semiotics of signs, symbols, colours, icons and so on.

Similarly, Kourdis (2014) describes the process of intersemiotic translation between verbal and visual semiotic systems by examining the translatability of colour in communication as a non-verbal semiotic system. Pastoureau (2009) considers colour as a social phenomenon ascribed a unique meaning, code or value by the society. All colours have codes that define their use and the code can be interpreted by language users through socio-semiotic analysis into institutionalized image (Caivano & López, 2006). By implication, colour can be used to project racism, sorrow, danger, purity and any other emotion or thoughts. This suggests that the use of colour, sign or image in language communicates non-verbal semiotic cues in the use of language. Therefore, the choice of colour 'black' as a prefix to some English words has semiotic properties that are tainted by racial prejudice and discrimination. The use of colour as a symbol of meaning in the English language has a very long history. The colour 'black' in particular has been conventionally projected to represent evil or inferior because of age-long racial inclinations towards the colour.

Although McClean (1988) agrees that racism exists in language, he insists that there are no linguistic associations between the word 'black' and evil or darkness in relation to Africans or black-skinned people. On the contrary, Oshodi (2006) laments that most white Americans consider the use of colour 'black' as evil, unhealthy, and hostile with English words such as - black market, blacklist, black out, black mood, black magic, black death, black sheep, black face, black hand, black hole, black shirt, blackmail, blackball, black mark and so on – all portray negativity. To Oshodi (2006), the use of 'black' as a prefix does not suggest any racial sentiments, however, any

black-skinned persons consciously or unconsciously interprets the symbol of the colour ‘black’ to represent inferiority or evil. For example, an analysis of the use of the black colour as prefix of certain English words has both denotative and derogatory:

Table 1

List of selected English words with the prefix ‘black’.

N0	Word	Meaning	Status/ Use
1	Blackboard	A board coloured ‘black’ with a smooth surface for writing.	Denotative
2	Black head	Small spot on people’s skin with black head	Denotative
3	Black currant	A fruit: black berries	Denotative
4	Black out	Total darkness caused by lack of power supply	Derogatory
5	Black Maria	Vehicle used for transporting prisoners	Derogatory
6	Blackmail	A crime	Derogatory
7	Black market	An illegal form of trade	Derogatory
8	Black leg	A strike breaker	Derogatory
9	Black sheep	The odd one	Derogatory
10	Black guard	A dishonest man	Derogatory

From the table above, it is evident that the use of black-prefixed words in English language is often derogatory. For example, Maria, mail, sheep, guard, leg and out in the examples above have unique meanings apart from the derogatory meanings above. This supports the views of some scholars (Oshodi, 2006; Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017) that the word black is usually used in English language and in most cultures to represent negativity or inferiority. Austin (2004, p.12) described the word ‘black’ as a ‘curse’ that is placed upon a whole group of people thereby the negative associations of the word with a group of people or other English words (in form of prefix) by culture and society has become more and more conditioned to prejudice.

For Oshodi (2006), the continued use of the colour ‘black’ as prefix in a demeaning way is dispiriting and denigrating. Also, Watts-Jones (2004) posits that there is subtle racism in the English language because some of the words or phrases in the language are capable of reminding black-skinned people that their colour is related to extortion (*blackmail*), rejection (*blackball*), banishment (*blacklist*), illicitness (*black market*), and death. This is perhaps why Oshodi (2006) recommended that black scholars of the English language should start a campaign for the removal of these negative usages from standard dictionaries. Also, the choice of the prefix ‘black’ in Table 1 above can be described as intentional because it did not alter the meaning of the words denotatively as it can be seen below:

Table 2

Use of prefix in denotative meaning.

No	Word	Synonym	Prefixed	Meaning	Status/Use
1	Legal	Lawful	Il-legal	Crime	Denotative
2	Write	Inscribe	Un-written	Not written	Denotative

3	Agree	Support	Dis-agree	Not supported	Denotative
4	Appropriation	Supply	Mis- appropriation	To mismanage	Denotative
5	Dependence	Supported	In-dependence	Freedom/Liberty	Denotative
6	Organise	Arrange	Dis-organise	Not arranged	Denotative
7	Solicited	Requested	Un-solicited	Not requested	Denotative
8	Legible	Bold	Il-legible	Not seen	Denotative
9	Plugged	Connected	Un-plugged	Not connected	Denotative
10	Qualify	Eligible	Dis-qualify	Not eligible	Denotative

Tables 1 and 2 show that the use of colour ‘black’ as a prefix with words in English language has an established semiotics undertone borne out of cultural and racial sentiments. Colours can be used to elicit certain meanings in the reader or user of a language. For example, the choice of colour ‘white’ for a wedding dress can suggest purity or virginity depending on the culture of the language users. Similarly, Al-Shraideh and El-Sharif (2019, p.24) found that the use of colour ‘black’ in the Holy Quran projects a negative connotation as the term ‘black faces’ was used to represent unbelievers that would have a predestined end of shame, fear, catastrophic destiny, and punishment.

In addition, Lyons (2020) posits that the English language certainly has its fair share of racist words and phrases because there are several racism-induced words in the language. These words have been found to have underlying racial colourations and their continued use without opting for their less offensive synonyms suggests that it is intentional. Lyons (2002) avers that most of the English words or expressions with racial colouration have their origins in slavery or racism. According to Lyons (2020), English words or phrases with racial colourations include gyped/jipped from the word ‘gypsy’ often used as a derogatory name for the Roma tribe of India, whites only (apartheid-related), sold down the river (slave trade-related).

Most of these conventionally convenient English words or phrases with subtle racial roots, especially the words with prefix ‘black’ are derogatory. Watts-Jones (2004) avers that the use of the colour ‘black’ in the English idiom, ‘black sheep’ often has nothing to do with being African or African American, but it is often used to project a negative meaning. However, McClean (1988) opines that it is difficult to understand how English words such as ‘blackball’, ‘black book’, ‘blackguard’, ‘black hole’, ‘blacklist’ or ‘blackmail’ convey subtle racial connotations more than words like white lies, whitecap, white-witch, white-hot and whitewash.

In conclusion, the arguments of McClean with reference to the racial connotations in the use of the colours ‘black’ and ‘white’ is not convincing because the use of prefix ‘white’ in each of the words is not derogatory unlike the meanings of the words prefixed with black. From the foregoing, the racial connotation of words with prefix ‘black’ and the semiotic elements of colour as a symbol or image in language use is evident. The common connection between English words with the prefix colour ‘black’ and their meanings suggest a consistent yet subtle form of racism in the English language.

4. Implications for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction

Meanings can be generated from all languages based on the interpretations of verbal and non-verbal systems. Processing the meanings of non-verbal elements such as images, symbols or colours in linguistic expressions requires an understanding of the cultural and socio-semiotic elements of the colour or image. The intersemiotic translation or transmutation between language and colour suggests that choice or use of colour in language is not accidental because non-verbal cues such as colours, images or symbols in language can be interpreted. An analysis of the socio-semiotic properties of the black colour shows that both the word and colour 'black' are often used as symbol or emblem of racism, negativity and inferiority. Social interpretation of the black colour across cultures shows that the colour is associated with racial colouration and discrimination.

Black is both a word and colour that is often used in the English language as a prefix with words that are mostly derogative in meaning or represent negativity and racial inclinations. These words are taught during English language instruction in schools as part of affixation and idiomatic expressions to unconsciously institutionalize systemic racism globally. The irony is that most English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers are unaware that they are channels for propagating racism in the classroom through the continued teaching of English lexicons or idioms with racial roots. English language learners of African descent are compelled to accept that the use of the black colour often stands for negativity and words that are prefixed with 'black' have derogatory meanings.

The knowledge of intersemiotic translations and transmutation should be demonstrated by second language teachers in the process of instruction. Instruction in ESL classroom should extend beyond the linguistic properties of the words, because the learners need to be taught or exposed to the concept of meanings using the knowledge of transmutation. All forms of racial sentiment should be discouraged and the black-prefixed English lexicon should be taught primarily based on their linguistic properties.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, considering the intersemiotic properties of language and the expression of meanings, there is a need to correct the current dogma associated with the use of the English lexicon 'black' when used as a prefix with other words. Language teachers need to actively teach affixation as an aspect of the English language to initiate a new consciousness that is devoid of racist colouration, perception and interpretation of the word/colour black in the English language. Instruction in ESL classrooms should be rebranded and restructured to be devoid of racism and racial prejudice. Addressing the issue of racism in English language through classroom instruction is important because education is capable of engendering a measurable change in the behaviour of the recipients. Therefore, to effectively challenge the existing conventions and semiotics on

the colour black in the English language, there is a need for the revitalization of language education or instruction in schools.

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