

# Critical Discourse Analysis—The Slogans in the Protests for George Floyd

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Critical discourse methodology is an extremely significant and meaningful branch of systemic functional linguistics which pays more attentions in the formation, diffusion, and acceptability of certain discourse, and also the investigation on social background; meanwhile it is always used to discuss and pin down those familiar perceptions and ideologies that have been overlooked by the public so that new re-examination can be carried out to dig out some other attractive points. In this paper some basic theoretical basis and methodologies will be explained and then, by applying the critical discourse analysis, the slogans in the protests from Minneapolis to the whole America. Racial discrimination has invariably been a severe social problem for more two centuries in the U.S.A. After the Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln, 157 years has passed; however this kind of serious social issue still haunts among every American people. Countless protests have happened in the development of America; thus by analyzing the different types of slogans in this recent protest, novel discovery and meaningful retrospect would emerge.

*Keywords:* critical discourse analysis, methodology, protest slogans, social background, racial discrimination

## Introduction

Critical linguistics mainly does critical analysis for discourse, especially public discourse in bid to strengthen one's language awareness, improve his appreciation and criticism ability in the use of language so that he can build the competence to get with it in the more and more involvements of language in social life and work.

About the protest:

On the evening of May 25, 2020, the police received a report that someone was suspected of counterfeiting groceries with fake note. After the police sent out and arrived, they questioned the African American man (George Floyd, 46), who was in a car on the side of the road and was believed him to be the suspect.

According to the surveillance video provided by the roadside shop, after the conversation, a policeman handcuffed Floyd, took him to the roadside and sat down, and continued to scold him. Since then, another video shot by a passer-by shows three police officers pushing Floyd on the ground, one of them with his knees pressed against his neck. Floyd repeatedly called for help, struggling and moaning, claiming that he could not breathe. He begged the police to move his knees: "please, please, please, I can't breathe..." He also shouted,

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“Mom! Mom!” At this time, a number of passers-by gathered to accuse the police of excessive violence and put Floyd in danger. But the police that was holding Floyd down glared at the passers-by and even pulled out his gun from his uniform pocket. Another policeman stood by, asking passers-by to stay away from the scene. Floyd struggled for a few minutes before falling into a coma. Passers-by also repeatedly asked the police to check his pulse, but the police were indifferent. The police did not let Floyd go until paramedics arrived at the scene and were ready to carry him on a stretcher. Floyd was in a coma with weakness when he was pulled up. Although the ambulance took him to the hospital for saving, and after an hour of rescue, the doctor had to announce his death, which triggered off protests in Minnesota, where hundreds of protesters assembled to demand “justice” and had conflicts with the police.

In this paper, through the methods of critical linguistics, by analyzing the slogans in this protest, social attribute and social background will receive more research and discussions, because different from traditional discourse analysis, critical linguistics believes that language is a type of social practice, an involvement power of social process. Languages do not only reflect society but also directly get involved into the social matters and the formations of social relationships. It investigates both what is language and the reason of language patterns and usages, not merely research the discourse itself, but also the process of its formation.

### **Methodology in Critical Analysis**

Critical linguistics tries to investigate the relationship among language, power, and ideology. It regards discourse as the result of the producer’s choice in both formal structure and ideology, and holds that discourse is a kind of social context. The analysis of discourse cannot be separated from the analysis of discourse practice itself and its social context.

Since beginning critical linguistics has taken itself as “instrumental linguistics”, it stresses the discoveries of implicit ideologies that hidden in the discourses, in particular, the prejudice, discrimination, and distortion of facts that people are accustomed to, and explanations of the social conditions and the role in the power struggle, by analyzing the marks or symbols like a word, a phrase, or a sentence and also the connection meaning among them. The purpose of critical discourse analysis should be consistent with that of critical sociology, which is said by Connerton: “criticism... aims to change or even eliminate the conditions that are considered to lead to untrue or distorted consciousness...make the previously hidden things appear, and open a process of introspection in individuals or groups, so as to obtain the liberation from the previous repression and domination”.

Critical linguistics has paid special attention to two non-literary fields; one is public discourse and official discourse, including government, administrative personnel, judicial officials, business organizations, news organizations, etc. These discourses are worthy of analysis because they come from the government and play a direct role in shaping the attitude, meaning, and ideology of a society. Moreover, for such kind of discourses, common people always only accept them passively and rarely respond directly to the producers of those discourses. The second non-literary field is personal discourse, that is, formal or informal conversation between individuals. It is easy to get used to personal discourse and not realize its ideological significance. Critical linguists often study topics such as gender discrimination, racial discrimination, inequality in education, employment and justice, war, nuclear weapons and power, political strategies and business practices.

## Case Studies

### Black Lives Matter—BLM

In 2011, white police officer Jason Stockley killed a 24-year-old African American, Anthony Lamar Smith. On September 15, 2017, the court acquitted Stockley and triggered protests in St. Louis, Missouri. Protesters marched in the streets, chanting “no justice, no peace”, and some chanted “black lives matter”. Since then this slogan has been used to express black people’s anger and irritations. Also in the protest in Minneapolis this year this phrase is inevitable. On June 13, 2020, a “black lives matter” slogan was painted on the pavement of a street in downtown San Francisco, California, which shows that this slogan has already been a milestone-like catchphrase.

Racial discrimination has caused numerous social tragedies in American society since the foundation of America. Countless men have made countless contributions to the equality between white people and black people, but the reality is that African American people sometimes suffer from violent law enforcement, unfair treatment, and even many people lose their lives because of the “special” treatment of white police. In this slogan we can easily interpret the social background, causing events and deep-rooted discrimination among different races in the U.S.A. society. It is well-known that all men are created equal, not only life but also dignity; however, in America, the world’s greatest power on this planet, racial discrimination still lingers around. Nowadays around all the world, racial equality, human rights equality had already arrived long time ago, but in America, there still many shadows hanging above the black people. In 2008, after Obama was elected president, people expected the United States to enter a “post racial society”, but in fact, racist ideas are still popular in the United States, and more obscure and complex than before, whereas, this year similar episode happened again with violence, brutality, and sarcasm.

*Black Lives Matter* here, *black* refers the African American people, *lives* is the plural of life, and *matter* stands for the importance and significance, so together this phrase expresses the black people’s inner simple and unadorned pursuit that they black people do not demand too many privileges; they just expect to be treated equally as the white ones, which seems so simple and pathetic and easy to fulfill, but reality always gives a heavy blow.

This slogan sans for the pure but simple expectation of the special group of African Americans. Now that slavery has been abolished for many years, this is still happening, which inevitably triggers off the protest and irritations of the black.

### I Can’t Breathe

This phrase is abstracted from the pleading words in the last moment of George Floyd’s life. He struggled to take a breath, because of the violent treatment of the police; what he needed is just a stream of fresh air to support his life, but every attempt failed, he was suffocated to death just because he may use fake note in the roadside market. This phenomenon reveals that in America, even though most part of the citizen admit to take every race equally, Obama, a black president was elected, the discrimination still deep-rooted in relatively a number of white people’s heart, which may manifest in their daily life, theirs personal behaviors and if they enter into the service fields, like police, public officials, racism is like a bomb. It’s only a matter of time before it explodes. Racists still exist in this great country, and it just like the police’s leg pressing on the neck of George Floyd, making him breathless including other African Americans.

At the last moment of George Floyd, he kept begging the police let him take a breath; he continued calling mom; he kept groaning, gasping for breath. We have no trouble to imagine his hopelessness and despair in the last few minutes of his life without knowing what kind of felony he had committed. This slogan not only expresses the breathless situation of George Floyd, but also the suffocating racism is still haunting around the U.S.A. It represents the hatred and disgust to the white police's violence and cruelty and their unreleased pain and anger. After all, breathing is the basic requirements of a human being. Simple but powerful than any words.

### **Silence Is Violence**

Silence and violence is a pair of end rhyme, and this phrase is easy to read aloud because of its rhyme. *Silence* refers to those who are indifferent and stand by without speaking anything; *violence*, of course stands for the violent treatment that applied to George Floyd as well as other innocent black people. Silence is really a terrible evil. Sometimes it is because of the indifference of the relevant personnel that the harm can still continue. It is because everyone's silence that the wicked are allowed to be fearless. The African Americans use this kind of slogan to call on everyone not to be silent, stand up bravely and speak for the black people, and cry for the unfairness.

This slogan uses rhyme in order to speak aloud, and cry for justice. Since a lot of black people and white people just chose to stand by and be silent, maybe it seems they merely do not want get themselves in troubles, but what you did always comes back to you. Thus when the unfair and injustice appear, everyone in the community even the society shoulders the responsibility to carry on some protests to call for the justice back to the citizen, not merely the black ones.

### **Stop Produce Violence**

It is quite easy to figure out in this tragedy that violence is the main cause that made George Floyd's death. Violent treatment is no doubt an obvious explicit suffering that countless black people suffered from the racists not only in school but also in community life. It is extremely easy to find the definition of violence that violence is behavior which is intended to hurt, injure, or kill people.

In discrimination, racism refers to a person's attitude of disdain, dislike, and exclusion towards the other race than his own race, which is manifested in speech and behavior. Racial discrimination in the United States is characterized by persistence, systematization, and comprehensiveness, which seriously threatens the protection and realization of human rights of ethnic minorities in the United States. From the overall situation in 2018, racial discrimination in the field of law enforcement and justice in the United States has not improved. Hate crimes, especially anti-Semitism, are rampant. Ethnic minorities are extremely disadvantaged in the economic, social, work, health, and other fields. The exclusive speech of senior government officials further intensifies the wave of racism in American society. So violent behavior to minority is a highly apparent racism. This slogan that is from the bottom definition is used to urge the society first cease violence in all the various aspects to the black people. Using imperative sentence makes it louder and more powerful.

### **Prosecute Police, No Justice No Peace**

This slogan shows their attitudes towards to this tragedy that is what the need is no compromise, but justice. Since black life is the same to white life, thus everything needs to follow the legal procedures and provide all of us a justice according to the law. Only a reasonable and legal fair trial can bring about a clean world. Maybe racial discrimination can never be eradicated, but we must let the racists know that an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. In this slogan we can find out these African American, their severe pain and the

scorching anger in their heart. The last way to get justice is law; otherwise they will never stop the protest; the peace will not come.

For the black, their people have suffered a lot from the racist since they stepped on this continent. They and their ancestors had made great commitments; they participated in the America's War of Independence; they made contributions to the wonderful development of American economy; they fought for the liberty in U.S. Civil War; they sacrificed themselves to join the Second World War... There is no doubt every black people belongs to the U.S.A. This country was born with color, and black is definitely the most eye-catching one. No one has the right to deny the great contributions that black people have made; however they still cannot escape from suffering from so many discriminations and unfair treatments. Fortunately, they never be silent and stand by; every time such kind of unfair tragedy happens, they bravely stand out and carry out protest or strike without any hesitation. The road to equality is never smooth, and also, they will not stop fight for it.

### Conclusion

Generally speaking, critical linguistics has made three contributions to linguistic research, especially discourse analysis. First of all, it makes more and more people realize the social meaning and ideological function of discourse, as well as the close relationship between language structure and social structure. Secondly, it expands the research field of stylistics, and widely applies the traditional stylistic analysis techniques, which mainly focus on literary texts, to the analysis of non-literary texts. By reaching and analyzing these slogans from this protest, it is exceedingly easy to find out the origination, causes, historical background, social background, people's reactions, and so on; therefore as an important aspect of discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis will be closely related to linguistics, cognition, and society. The continuous development of linguistic research promotes the theoretical construction of critical discourse analysis. In fact, it highlights the power relationship and ideological process that people turn a blind eye to in language. Compared with mainstream linguistics and discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis pays more attention to the deeper level of social system and social structure to find the reasons of discourse. What's more, it not only emphasizes the influence of society on discourse, but also studies the reaction of discourse on society, fully recognizing the great role of discourse in the change and reproduction of social culture in modern and post-modern society.

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