BOOK REVIEW

The everyday language of white racism
by Jane H. Hill

Reviewed by Desmond Painter
Department of Psychology
Stellenbosch University
South Africa

Over the past two decades discourse analysis has contributed significantly to the social psychology of racism. In fact, racism remains one of the most productive areas of research in discursive social psychology – in terms of both its theoretical and social significance. The classic study in the field is probably Wetherell and Potter’s (1992) Mapping the language of racism, which specifically focused on racist discourse in New Zealand, but developed from its empirical material many of the crucial theoretical benchmarks of a discourse analytic approach to the social psychology of racism.

South African social psychologists likewise have made crucial contributions to the study of racism and racist discourse in particular. Durrheim and Dixon’s (2005) Racial encounter: The social psychology of contact and desegregation certainly proved to be a worthy successor to the Wetherell and Potter (1992) text: besides illuminating racist discourse in post-apartheid South Africa it also forcefully introduced the materiality of embodied practice and socio-spatial arrangements to a discipline that frequently overemphasises the cognitive and the discursive. Their
But discourse analysis has never been restricted to social psychology. On the contrary, social psychology was a latecomer to the so-called ‘discursive turn’ in the social sciences and humanities, and paid its debt to language when many other disciplines were already heading for firmer shores – embodiment, practice, affect, and a renewed confrontation with psychoanalysis and subjectivity, to name but a few of the more recent theoretical preoccupations in the social sciences and the humanities.

Still, various strands of discourse theory and approaches to discourses analysis in the social sciences remained current and relevant throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Here too racism, racialisation, and other dimensions of the politics of exclusion dominated the research agenda. The names Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Jan Blommaert, most of whom are critical or applied linguists, and all of whom, under the broad rubric of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), have contributed to the study of racism, have become synonymous with the progressive use of discourse analysis in the social sciences.

Whilst social psychologists have engaged CDA to some extent, there has been far less traffic between social psychology and another neighbouring discipline, namely, linguistic anthropology. In this regard, Jane Hill’s (2008) *The everyday language of white racism*, a neat summary and extension of the author’s work over the last number of years, including her rightfully renowned work on ‘mock Spanish’ and the reproduction of white public space, certainly demands attention. Hill starts from a familiar assumption, namely, that white racism is not on the wane, but has instead undergone a number of discursive transformations that have rendered it more subtle or hidden. But however inconspicuous the language of racism may seemingly appear to be at times, racial inequality and injury remain stark. Hill demonstrates this vividly with data from the United States of America (US); South Africans, however, will not need to be convinced.

Hill’s is an ethnographic account of the everyday language of white racism in the US specifically, but it will be relevant and fascinating for readers from other societies as well. Her discussions of the reproduction of white racism in slurs and gaffes, the use of ‘mock Spanish’ by white speakers, and the appropriation to white speech of forms usually associated with African Americans, extend beyond yet another account of the content of racist discourse, or the rhetorical maneuvers in which speakers engage to accomplish racist talk whilst inoculating themselves against charges of racism.

In other words, Hill (and this is true of linguistic anthropology more broadly) is less prone than discourse analysts in social psychology to dematerialise language in the pursuit of structures and patterns of meaning, insisting instead on the materiality
of linguistic forms themselves. This allows for yet another productive way to approach the linguistic enactment and reproduction of racism and a racialised public space. Even in Durrheim and Dixon (2005), with all their focus on the materiality of spatial practices, language operates at a certain distance from the materiality of practice. Language offers itself to analysts primarily as a reservoir of ideological themes and recurring tropes, images, and arguments, all of which serve to legitimate or justify what happens when (racialised) bodies meet in material spaces. Whilst this is undeniably also true and valuable, it does neglect somewhat the materiality of language itself; and no wonder then that despite the many South African studies of racist discourse, most of which focus on the ‘ideational’ component of racism, almost no work has been done which explores the stubborn or shifting patterns of racialisation by linking it directly to the materiality of language variants, accents, linguistic appropriations (e.g., white people taking on words or phrases from African languages), and linguistic ‘genres’ like jokes, gaffes, and slurs.

Hill’s brilliant and truly thought-provoking analysis of the racialising effects of ‘mock Spanish’ in the US, for example, relies not firstly on what people say, content-wise, but on how language is itself part of the materiality of relations of domination, exploitation, and racist public space – even before language is also employed to explain and justify the status quo.

Hill also engages with the dynamic field of language ideologies, likewise a research tradition neglected by discursive social psychology, but certainly relevant to its concerns – especially in a country like South Africa where language is embodied in so many different ways, and in which the ownership of the means of production of legitimate speech has not been democratised.

In conclusion, this is another important volume on racism from a discourse analytic perspective. It is accessible, engaging, and well worth the read. It is my hope that it finds a receptive audience amongst social psychologists.

**Title:** The everyday language of white racism  
**Author:** Jane H. Hill  
**Publisher:** Wiley-Blackwell  
**Date:** 2008  
**ISBN:** 978-1-4051-8453-3  
**Pages:** 224
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Desmond Painter is a lecturer in psychology at Stellenbosch University. He teaches mainly social psychology, and has recently published, with Clifford van Ommen, *Interiors: A history of psychology in South Africa* (Unisa Press, 2008).