

A Pragmatic Analysis of Anti- Racism Protest Placards

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Abstract

This study examines the use of placards as a tool for advocating social change. The issue of racism remains a societal ill and the study focuses on how language as well visual elements like placards can be employed to provoke societal change. The speech acts theory by Austin and Searle classified into locution, illocutionary and perlocutionary and Hoyer and Kaiser's visual pragmatic act theory are used for the analysis. 10 anti-racism placards selected randomly from the internet are analysed using a descriptive qualitative approach. The results reveal that illocutionary actions like expressive, commissives, directives and representatives are performed while the visual elements employed in the placards also evoke strong signals of warning, commanding and other emotions aimed at bringing about an end to racial subjugation.

Keywords: Placards, Racism, Protests, Speech Act Theory, Visual Pragmatic Act Theory

Introduction

Communication is any act that involves passing a message, information, desire, perception or state of mind from one person to another or from a group of people to another group. Through communication a lot of physical, practical and social identity needs are satisfied. Communication could be verbal or non verbal, linguistic or non linguistic. For communication to be effective there must be an agreement on the meaning of the words or symbols used. Language serves as a means of communication. Through language, people often give off signals. According to Saddock (2006), 'when we speak we can do all sorts of things from aspirating a consonant, to constructing a relative clause, to insulting a guest, to starting a war.' (p. 53) Beyond that, language serves as a vehicle of reformation and a reflection of social identity.

Racism is a belief by a particular group of people, of a particular race, that they are superior to another group as a result of social or inborn physical traits that are different from those of the other racial groups. Clair & Dennis (2015) define racism as, an 'ideology of racial domination in which the presumed biological or cultural superiority of one or more racial groups is used to justify or prescribe the inferior treatment or social position(s) of other racial groups.(p. 857) The differences that set apart one race from another may include physical features like skin colour, shape of eyes, social status, culture and even language. These differences sometimes result in the discrimination and subjugation of the perceived inferior groups. The history of racism dates as far back as the days of slavery and colonialism. Over the years many have challenged the idea of racism but this societal ill still exists. Many blacks particularly, still face racial discrimination today. Oluo,I, (2018), states that, the police force in America was created to serve the white Americans but to police the black Americans. Racial discrimination is a phenomenon that has often resulted in violence and sometimes death and has generated a lot of protests over the years and language has been a vital tool of expression.

In this study, particular attention is paid to the 'Black lives matter' anti racism protest following the death of George Floyd, a forty six year old African American, who was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, 2020. He had been accused of using a counterfeit bill and was arrested. One of the white police officer, Derek Chauvin, who arrested George, knelt on his neck while already on handcuffs, until Floyd became motionless and eventually died. This sparked rage all across America and resulted in the Black Lives Matter protest which eventually spread all over the world. Humans usually react when they feel shortchanged or demeaned. This sometimes results in protests. A protest usually occurs as a result of the desire to be heard and to bring about change. The study thus, explores how speech acts and visual elements are used as a means of provoking change during protests.

Literature Review

The origin of Pragmatics as a field of linguistic study can be traced back to an American philosopher Charles Morris in the 1930s. Morris was interested in semiotics which is the study of signs and symbols. He distinguished three dimensions of semiotics: Syntax, 'which addressed the formal relations of signs and symbols.' Semantics, which is the 'relation of signs to what they denote' and Pragmatics which is the 'relation of signs to their users and interpreters' (Horn, 2006). Over the years, pragmatics has expanded widely and has become a popular trend. Mey (2006) argued that pragmatics is an extension of linguistics on its own term and much more than just a linguistic waste-basket. According to Hoyer (2009) concerning the recent state of pragmatics as a linguistic field of study,

Today, Pragmatics has arguably reached a crossroad. Two major trends or schools have emerged over the past 30 years: the one rooted- perhaps locked- in the ordinary language philosophy origins of pragmatics and labeled the Anglo-American tradition, the other extending that tradition to encompass a much broader range of issues which are psychological, sociological and contextual in orientation and referred to as the 'continental' tradition (p. 187).

On account of this 'crossroad', pragmatics has been 'notoriously' difficult to define. Ariel (2008) attributes this difficulty to the fact that it has proven almost impossible to draw a line between 'the patterning of phenomena assumed to be classical pragmatic topics... and the common sets of definition for pragmatics. Mey (2006) also agrees that it is difficult to state where pragmatics begins and where it stops. This difficulty notwithstanding, different linguists have defined pragmatics in different ways. Fromkin & Rodman (2007) defines pragmatics as 'the interpretation of linguistic meaning in context' (p. 333). Yule (1996) sees pragmatics as 'the study of intended speakers meaning' (p. 3), Leech and Thomas (1990) defines pragmatics as 'the study of meaning of linguistic utterances for their users and interpreters.' (p. 173) While Crystal (1997) sees pragmatics as, 'the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effect their use of language has on the other participants in the act of communication.' (p. 120) Two important factors can be seen in the various definitions of pragmatics: the language users and context in deriving meaning of utterances.

Speech Act Theory: According to Fromkin and Rodman (2007), language can be used to do many things like betting, making promises, issuing warnings, offering congratulations christening boats and performing whole lots of other actions. Ezeifeke (2018) agrees that speech acts are utterances that are in themselves actions. The speech act theory was developed by JL Austin, a British Philosopher in his book, 'How to do things with words', written posthumously, in 1975. Austin tried to remedy what he saw as a limitation in the works of earlier philosophers who believed that declarative sentences described state of affairs that can be classified in

terms of truth and falsity. Austin argued that some sentences do not just pass information that can be regarded as true or false, but they also perform actions. Austin distinguished between what he called performatives and constatives. He defined performatives as utterances that perform actions while constatives as utterances that simply pass information or describe some situation. He further classified speech act as having three levels of act which include:

Locutionary act: This is the basic unit of utterance. It is an act of producing a meaningful linguistic utterance (Yule 1996).

Illocutionary act: This is ‘an act preformed via the communicative force of an utterance.’ For example, utterances can be made in order to make a statement or offer an explanation (Yule 1996).

Perlocutionary act: This is “the intended effect on the hearer” (Yule 1996). According to Austin, perlocutionary acts consist in the production of effects upon the thoughts, feelings, or actions of the addressee(s), speaker, or other parties,

Searle (1969) modified Austin’s Speech act types. He defined speech acts ‘as the basic or minimal unit of linguistic communication.’ He also classified illocutionary acts into five types. They include,

Representatives: These are acts that state what the speaker believes to be the case or not. Examples include statements of facts, assertions, conclusions and descriptions. (Yule 1996)

Directives: These are acts that speakers use to get someone to do something; they express what the speaker wants. Some examples include acts of commands, orders, requests and suggestions. (Yule 1996)

Commissives: are acts that commit speakers to some future course of action and they include promises, threats, refusals, pledges and expresses the intention of the speaker.(Black 22).

Expressives: These are acts that state what the speaker feels. They express the psychological state of the speakers like states of joy, pain, sorrow, pleasure, dislike and others. (Yule 1996)

Declaratives: These are acts that change the world via their utterances.(Yule 1996)

Jacob Mey identified pitfalls in the speech act theory and attempted to provide a remedy. According to him, ‘Some American linguist once said, “The text is all we have.” I would like to add that there is no text without context.’ (Mey 2011). He agrees that actions can be performed by uttering a speech act but he disagreed with the speech act theory which according to him is based on, ‘the abstract idealisation of the intention of the speaker and hearer and not on social reality’ He argues that speech has a history and context of use without which cannot be viable.

He came up with the pragmatic act theory which is made up of what he termed *pragmeme*. According to him,

The theory of pragmatic acts focuses ;on the environment in which both speaker and hearer find their affordances, such that the entire situation is brought to bear on what can be said in the situation as well as on what is actually being said.’ (p. 221)

Pragmeme comprises of the total context of speech and not just the speech in itself. It consists of the ‘activity’ and ‘textual’ component of discourse. The activity part is made up of the roles of the participants of discourse while the textual part consists of the different contextual variables that are seen in discourse situations (Acheoh, 2015).

Visual Pragmatic Acts Theory

Visual pragmatic acts are simply the ‘visual corollary of their verbal counterparts, pragmatic act (Hoye 2009). Just like pragmatic acts, Hoye states that visual pragmatic acts depend on’ concrete situations of the here and now and not on ideal representations that are peculiar to the speech act theory .He further identifies the fact that images can express multiple meanings. The functions such images are required to serve are more important than the images themselves. Goodman (1996) states that the meanings of pictures or images can depend on the purposes for which they are used. Kress & Van (2006) also agree that pictures can be used to serve different interest and can be manipulated by the user to suit his purpose. People are also bound to give meanings to images not just on account of the situation that surrounds such images but also on the world view or perception of their users. As a result, meanings given to such images may not be entirely free of bias.

The framework for this study is limited to Seale’s classification of illocutionary acts and Hoye and Kaiser visual pragmatic act theory.

Methodology

The research is a descriptive qualitative research type. Osuala (2005) states that, ‘the task of the qualitative methodologist is to capture what people say and do as a product of how they interpret the complexity of their world, to understand events from the view points of the participant.’ (p. 171) Data for this study is a random selection of anti-racism protest placards from the ‘Black lives matter’ protest following the death of George Floyd. 10 anti-racism placards are selected from the internet for analysis. They are analysed based on Searle’s classification of illocutionary acts and Hoye and Kaiser’s (2007) visual pragmatic acts theory.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Data 1



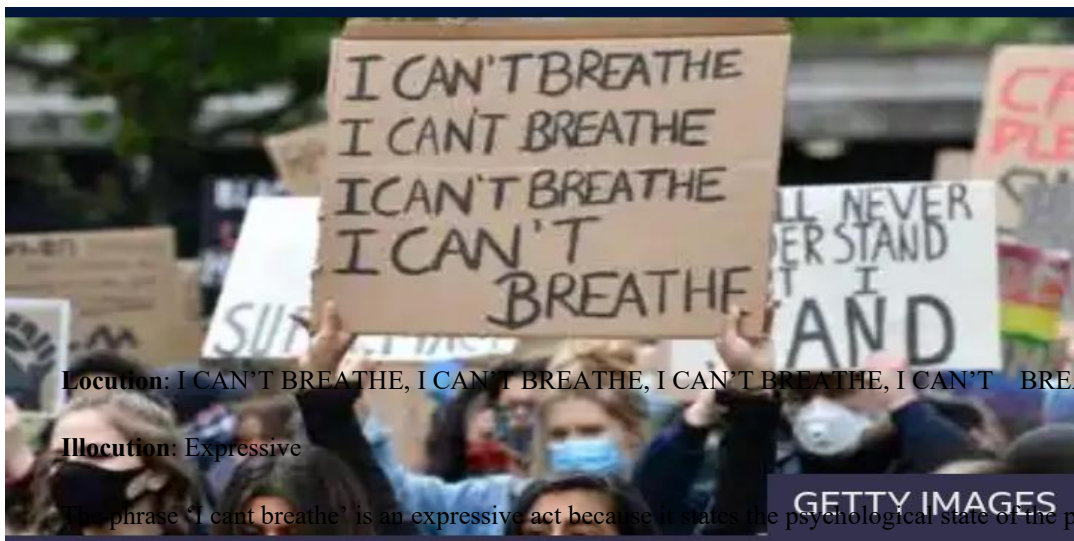
Location: Black lives matter

Illocution: Expressives

The inscription on the placard ‘ Black lives matter’ can be classified as an expressive act because it states the feeling of the protester.

Visual pragmatic act: The image above captures an African American man holding up a placard with the symbol of a clenched raised fist and the inscription black lives matter’ in an antiracist protest following George Floyd’s murder. The phrase does not suggest that black lives matter more than other lives but seem to be a passionate appeal that the blacks should be treated as equal to white and not as inferior but with the same courtesy and respect given to their white counterparts. The raised clenched fist is symbolic of defiance in the face of racial discrimination.

Data 2



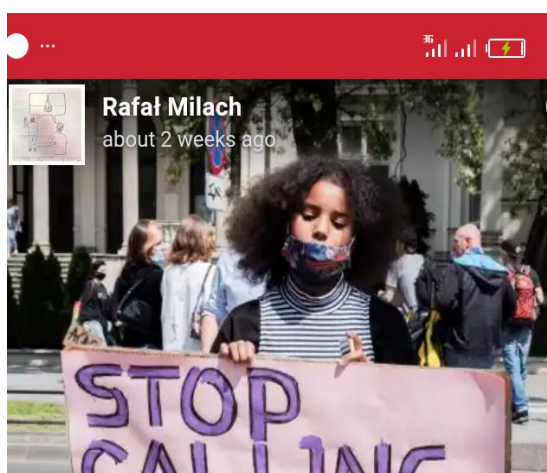
Locution: I CAN'T BREATHE, I CAN'T BREATHE, I CAN'T BREATHE, I CAN'T BREATHE

Illocution: Expressive

The phrase ‘I cant breathe’ is an expressive act because it states the psychological state of the protester.

Visual pragmatic act: The image shows protesters with one of them holding up the placard ‘ I CANT BREATHE, I CANT BREATHE, I CANT BREATHE I CANT BREATHE’. George Floyd repeated the utterance ‘I can’t breathe’ before he died in the hands of the police who had his knees on his neck until he finally died. According to Wikipedia, the phrase’ I cant breathe has been used by over 70 African Americans who have died in police custody The message on the placard reflects the fact that, the blacks ‘can no longer breathe’ due to racial discrimination and are faced with two options: death or revolution. . The mask worn by the protester, although used as a prevention against the spread of the covid 19 virus,also sends a powerful message about the ‘suffocation’ that the blacks are experiencing in the face of continued racial discrimination and police brutality.

Data 3



Locution : STOP CALLING ME MURZYN

Illocution: Directives

The phrase ‘ stop calling me murzyn’ is a directive because it reflects what the user wants.

Visual pragmatic act: The image above shows a young girl raising a placard on which is written ‘STOP CALLING ME MURZYN’ The term ‘murzyn’ has its root from the word moor which means black. It is a term used for blacks in Poland and has a negative connotation just like the word Negro. The young girl raises her placard as an objection to this label. According to Adler and Rodman (2006), ‘ The use of labels for racist purpose has a long ugly past . Through out history names have been used to stigmatise groups that other groups have disapproved of or felt superior to.’ The young girl is simply saying ‘STOP! I AM NO DIFFERENT FROM YOU.’ The face mask she has on appears significant but the context of the protest reveals that it is not an act of protest but a protection against catching the covid-19 virus.

Data 4

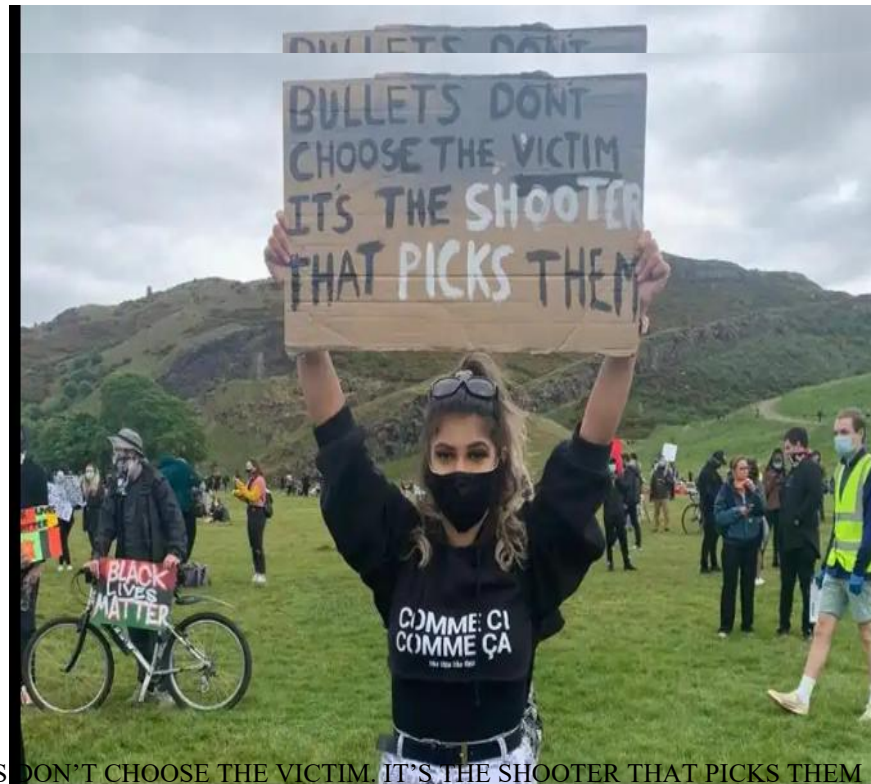


Locution: NO Justice NO Peace

Illocution: Commisives. Commissive because it is an act that is committing the protester to a future action.

Visual pragmatic act : The placard above contains the slogan, 'NO JUSTICE NO PEACE' It is one of the placards held in protest of George Floyd's killing. According to Wikipedia, the slogan has been used as early as 1986 after Michael Griffith, an African American, was murdered in the hands of a mob of white youths. The phrase seem to suggest that as long as injustice remains, peace will remain elusive. It is a threat that calls for all those affected by racial discrimination and police brutality to rise up and disrupt the peace of the nation until justice is served. According to Martin Luther King Jr. ' Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere'. Thus without justice, peace will remain an impossible dream. The image also shows a person dressed for war. This suggests that the protesters are ready for war if the injustice continues.

Data5



Locution : BULLETS DON'T CHOOSE THE VICTIM. IT'S THE SHOOTER THAT PICKS THEM

Illocution: Representative. This is because it states what the protester believes is the fact.

Visual pragmatic act: The placard above held up by a white woman is a protest against police brutality which sometimes results to violence and death. It states that it is the man behind the gun that chooses his victims and not the bullets that goes into the victim. The word 'picks' shows that there is a conscious selection by the police on whom they target. In this case the African Americans due to racial discrimination. The implication is that some white policemen purposely go after the blacks and brutalises them since they feel they are an inferior race. This is also a protest that the racists be called to order

Data 6



Locution: INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS A THREAT TO JUSTICE EVERYWHERE

Illocution: Representative: The protester believes that an act of injustice has multiple effect.

Visual pragmatic act: THE image above shows a placard with the inscription 'INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS A THREAT TO JUSTICE EVERYWHERE'. With the black lives matter symbol just underneath the writing. This is a quote attributed to Martin Luther King jr, who was a prominent leader of the American Civil Right Movement. He wrote this in prison where he had been unjustly jailed after organising a non violent protest against racism and unfortunately nothing has changed after many years. This suggests that no matter where injustice takes place, especially as pertains racial discrimination, it affects justice everywhere especially when nothing is done to promote fairness and justice, the act of injustice becomes a cancer that eats deep and destroys. The Black lives matter symbol on the placard reflects the struggle for black liberation against injustice.

Data7



Locution: WHITE SILENCE = VIOLENCE

Illocution: Directive. It is an act that is urging white people to speak up in the face of racial discrimination and police brutality.

Visual pragmatic act: The placard above is a picture of a white woman in the midst of other protesters with the inscription 'white silence = violence'. This presupposes that if more whites were to speak up against the brutality of the police on the blacks, rather than turning a blind eye to the injustice that occur as a result of racial discrimination, there would probably be more pressure on the police to exercise restraint and perform their

duties justly and so keeping quiet in the face of evil is being equally guilty of the crime. White silence= violence could also be a subtle threat to the white community to either be proactive in the fight against racism or face violence.

Data 8



Locution: RACISM IS A PANDEMIC

Illocution: Representatives. This expresses the belief of the protester

Visual pragmatic act: The placard 'Racism is pandemic; reflects the losses that the black community in America has suffered due to racial discrimination' on The background of the placard are written some names of some African Americans who have died in police custody over the years. The placard is a tribute to those that have died. It is an acknowledgment that they have not been forgotten. The word 'pandemic' on the placard is significant because the protest occurred in the heat of the covid 19 pandemic that had caused a lot of deaths all over the world. Protesters turned up in large numbers despite the need for social distancing because they believe racism poses a greater threat to them than covid 19 pandemic. According to CJ Williams, an anti- racism campaigner, ' Racism is as big a pandemic as covid 19, it's just been going on for a lot longer'.

Data 9



Locution: RISE UP AND RESIST . BLM

Illocution: Directives: it is a directive because it is urging the hearer to do something.

Visual pragmatic act: The image in the placard above is of a raised clenched fist with the inscription 'BLACK LIVES MATTER'. The history of the symbol goes back decades, it is a gesture of the blacks for liberation against racism. According to ABC News, the Black lives matter movement adopted the symbol following the death of Michael Brown another black youngster who was shot dead by police in Missouri in 2014. The clenched raised fist is symbolic of defiance and can be likened to an angry man ready to let all hell loose. While the broken handcuff is symbolic of the desire to be free from the shackles of oppression.

Data 10



Locution: NYPD

Illocution: Representatives. It is an act that states the belief of the protester

Visual Pragmatic Act: From the image above, it can be deduced that the vehicle in the placard belongs to the New York Police Department because of the inscription on it. The duty of the police is to maintain peace and order and to serve in fairness. They are the department to call when in trouble. This makes the splash of blood on the vehicle ironic because it suggests that the police department are the ones taking the very lives they are supposed to protect.

Discussion/Conclusion

Based on the analysis on illocutionary acts, the study concludes that expresives, directives, representatives and commissives are acts employed by the protesters, on the placards, for effective communication with the intention of persuading, appealing, convincing and even threatening.

The analysis based on Hoyer & Kaiser 's (2007) visual pragmatic acts also revealed that, 'Symbols are more than just labels: They are the ways we experience the world... They are used to represent things, processes, ideas or events.' (Adler & Rodman 2006, p.6). Some of the protest placards analysed symbolise defiance and resistance in the face of racial discrimination, others reflect the terrible havoc ,like deaths, that has resulted from racism while others reflect the desire of the blacks to be treated with the same respect given to the their white counterparts.

The role of language in the fight against racism cannot be undermined. Sometimes, it takes a protest to get people's feelings across and language remains a prominent tool in achieving this. Adler and Rodman (2006) agree that, 'communication does more than enable us to survive. It is the way- indeed the only way- we learn who we are.' (p. 10). Speech acts as well as visual pragmatic acts are examples of linguistic tools that can be used for effective communication.

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