

Sociocultural Studies via CDA in *Native Son* (1939)

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Abstract

This paper aims at the study of the artistic features of language in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. In order to pursue and achieve the mentioned goal, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will be the applied approach, which provides analytical tools to uncover the socio-cultural aspects of texts by analyzing their in-text language. "Modality," "Metaphor" and "Racist Discourse" are three major arguments to be studied under the CDA approach. By analyzing the predominant concerns of these three parts, this paper brings and reinterprets the serious problematic issues including power, the black oppression by the white, social limitations and racist ideology.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, metaphor, modality, *Native Son*, Richard Wright

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Introduction

A novel can be regarded as a manifestation of the relationship between the structure of the text itself as a social and cultural background through language and ideology. The critical discourse analysis (CDA) studies a text linguistically, which has been quite overlooked to be applied on *Native Son* (Wright 1939). By tracking and analyzing the linguistic expressions in *Native Son* in this paper, we will study the relationship between the language and the situation of the blacks in America's white community in 1930s. In *Native Son*, the unfair treatment between the whites and blacks is explicit through the language expressions that appear in the novel. In addition, from the language of the novel, it can be perceived that the domination of the white people over the black people in education, employment, and legal protection is severe; for instance, the black people were often given an undesirable or stereotypical concept by "the white men such as 'nigger,' 'murderer,' 'fool,' 'black servant' and 'lazy negro'" (Jismulatif et al., p. 197). Language of racism in *Native Son* dismantles racism practices and the domination of the white race over the black race. "From the relations between sentences that make up a language discourse, it can be traced that the whites had treated the blacks as an inferior race" (Jismulatif et al., p. 199). In order to achieve the goal of this paper, we will examine the text of *Native Son* from three different aspects of "modality," "racist discourse" and "metaphor."

1. Modality

Modality is a language unit that shows the attitude of a speaker to the proposition and also a tool to inform others. According to Titscher and Mayer modality is a pragmatically semantic category, which shows the orientation of the speaker, while Fowler states that "Modality is signified in a range of linguistic forms: centrally, the modal auxiliary verbs may, shall, must, need, and others; sentence adverbs such as probably, certainly, regrettably; adjectives such as necessary, unfortunate, certain" (Fowler, p. 73). Moreover, it can be interpreted as an action or comment by the text producer about one condition or action. It can also be expressed in a verbal mode such as "may," "can," "must" and "should." Michael Halliday believes that "Modality is the judgmental component of the meaning of the clause; the opinions-offered by the speaker, or sought from listener- regarding the like hood (modalization) or the desirability (modulation) of the thesis" (Halliday, p. 142). Moreover, Hasan (1991) divides modality into four categories which are "intentional," "epistemic," "deontic" and "dynamic" modalities. Intentional modality is a modal, which shows desire, hope, and question. Epistemic modality is a modal, which defines possibility and uncertainty. Deontic modality is a modal, which defines desirability, obligation, and permission. Dynamic modality is a modal which shows the ability like can.

In *Native Son*, the attitude of the speaker was exposed through the words "may," "might," "should," "will," "would," "can," and "could." "The hatred of the white race against the black race can be seen from the linguistic unit in the novel *Native Son*. It can be seen from the use of modality" (Jismulatif et al., p. 198). The use of modality in the discourse of racism has a certain motive in showing a power. In order to "systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relation of power and struggles over power" (Fairclough, p. 128). According to Richardson (2007), "Modality is referring to judgments, comment and attitude in text and talk and is indicated through the use of modal verbs such as may, could, should, will, and

must" (p. 241). In the novel, the use of modality is a form of inequality between the position of the white race and the black race; for instance, "He knew that black people *could not* go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat; they had to live on their side of the line; No white real estate man **would** rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live" (Wright, p. 161). The implementation of "could not" and "would" in "the above-mentioned discourse" "shows the inferiority of the blacks that they cannot afford to live in the same society as the whites" (Jismulatif et al., p. 198). It shows that the whites have the power on the blacks. The discourse shows the domination of white over the blacks. The blacks are often being treated unfairly when they want to use public facilities. As a racism discourse, *Native Son* absolutely has several types of modality because it defines the dominance of white people over the blacks. Modality in the racism discourse can be notified from the analytical process in the novel. It is found 176 "can or could," 83 "should," 851 "will or would," 41 "may," and 73 "might."

1.1 Modal "Can" or "Could"

The modal "can" or "could" expresses the ability or the willing to do something. The negative form is "cannot" or "could not". This is a dynamic modal, as shown in the following examples:

- (1) "He knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat" (Wright, p. 161).
- (2) "They built a big school and then drew a line around it and said that nobody could to it but those who lived within the line, that kept all the colored boys out" (Wright, p. 327).
- (3) "Crimes such as the Bigger Thomas murders could be lessened by segregating all Negroes in parks, playgrounds, theatres, and street cars" (Wright, p. 177).

Texts as in data (1), (2), and (3) are describing the discrimination of the whites over the blacks. From the text we can conclude that Thomas Bigger (protagonist of the novel) is a poor black man who could not afford a house in the white's people society. Bigger is considered as a villain. This shows that the black people have no power while the white people as the more superior race can treat the black people as they wish.

1.2 Modal "Should"

The modal "should" is used to express something that has supposed to be done. The negative form of it is "should not". This is a deontic modality which is used 83 times in *Native Son*.

- (4) "He felt that there should be a direction in which he and all other black people could go wholeheartedly" (Wright, p. 83).
- (5) "What should I want to do anything, I ain't got a chance, I don't know nothing, I'm just black and they make the laws" (Wright, p. 218).

The use of "should" in *Native Son* was to show that black people were supposed to do what white people order them to. In the novel, Bigger was constructed a black guy who realize the discrimination from the whites. Bigger had to do what had been ordered even though he did not want to.

1.3 Modal "Will" or "Would"

The modality "will" or "would" were used by Wright in *Native Son* to express the statement or the attitude of the white people. "Will" and "would" are also deontic modalities. Wright used the modal "will" or "would" in *Native Son* 851 times, as shown in the following examples:

- (6) "No white real estate man *would* rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live" (Wright, p. 161).
- (7) "What *would* prison mean to Bigger Thomas; It holds advantages for him that a life of freedom never had; to send him to prison *would* be more than an act of mercy" (Wright, p. 243).

The modal "would" in the data (6) and (7) shows the discrimination that black people would never be treated in the same way as the whites. This discrimination happened because of the hatred of the white people to the blacks. From the data (7), we can see that as a black people, Bigger was stated that he would never get to taste freedom in his life.

1.4 Modals "May" and "Might"

Modal "may" was used as much as 41 times in the novel. Modal "may" shows the superiority of the white people over the black people. There are so many suspecting on the black people just because they are black. On the other hand, the author used the modal "Might" 51 times. This shows that white people always think badly of black people and take them in custody. "Might" in data (10) and (11) are epistemic modality. As shown in the following examples:

- (8) "She was dead; she was white, she was a woman, he had killed her, he was black, he might be caught, he did not want to be caught, if he were they would kill him" (Wright, p. 70).
- (9) "They might think he would steal a dime, rape a woman, get drunk, or cut somebody" (Wright, p. 82).
- (10) "If your plea is guilty, "the Court may sentence you to death," or the Court may sentence you to the penitentiary for a term of not less than fourteen years" (Wright, p. 229).
- (11) "Some self-human black ape may be climbing through the windows of our homes to rape, murder, and burn our daughters" (Wright, p. 245).

The use of modal "might" in *Native Son* was to show that Bigger as black person exposes racial discrimination in law enforcement or law protection. Bigger was constructed a black murder who realized the discrimination from the whites; in other words, black citizens were often treated unfairly. Such condition enabled white citizens to commit violence against the blacks. In addition, the modal "may" in the data (10) and (11) is a deontic modality. This modal shows the domination of the white over the black people. In this case, the black stereotype as Bigger Thomas, for instance, could be manipulated by the whites to state that he was always wrong. Richard Wright, through his characters in *Native Son*, present a lot of social injustice committed by the white people such as racial prejudice, discrimination, segregation, and bad or unfair treatments such as subordinating, oppressing, exploiting, and violence against blacks.

2. Racist Ideology Discourse

Racism “as a social system in a society is a manipulation of power by a group of dominant race, in this case, the white people” (Jismulatif et al. p. 198). The dominance of a race is realized in the form of discriminatory practices against minority racial group. The dominance of an ethnic has two dimensions, namely social and cognitive dimensions. The social dimension of the practice of discrimination seen in the daily lives of different ethnic groups, while the cognitive dimension looks at beliefs about a group of ethnic prejudice, stereotypes, and ideology which serves as a motivation to legalize the practice of discrimination against an ethnic. Racist ideology is seen in the fields of education, employment, law, and the use of public facilities. As van Dijk states:

Racism is a complex system of social inequality in which at least the following components are combined: a) ideologically based social representations of (and about) groups. b) Group members’ mental models of concrete ethnic events. c) Everyday discriminatory discourse and other social practices. d) Institutional and organizational structures and activities. e) Power relations between dominant white and ethnic minority groups. (Dijk, p. 91)

The discourse analysis of *Native Son* texts shows “the practices of the racism ideology against blacks like different treatments in education, employment, law, the use of public facilities, and culture” (Jismulatif et al., p. 199). Those injustice treatments were realized in the form of discrimination, prejudice, and separation. The blacks were prohibited to live side by side with the white race. The Blacks were considered coming from a different planet to the whites. The ideology of racism from *Native Son* discourse can be seen from various aspects of social life of the blacks, such as the occurrence of discrimination, segregation, prejudice, and stereotypes in education, employment, legal protection, housing, and the use of public facilities.

2.1 Educational Aspect

Bigger as the central character in *Native Son* realized the importance of education for the black race in America; because, it was expected that the life of black race could be changed into a better one through education. As a result of discrimination against blacks in education, it was hard for them to get a better education. It was “strongly felt by Bigger when he wanted to continue his education to the higher level” (Jismulatif et al., p 200). The discrimination against blacks in education aspect can be seen from the following discourses:

- (1) “The white neighbor decided to limit the amount of education his black neighbor could receive” (Wright, p. 5).
- (2) “If you wasn’t black and you had some money and if they’d let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane, I could fly a plane if I had a chance” (Wright, p. 20).
- (3) “I wanted to be an aviator once, but they wouldn’t let me go to the school where I was suppose to learn it” (Wright, p. 327).

The quoted discourses (1), (2), and (3) above show that “Bigger” which is derived from the blacks tells that the blacks were not allowed to continue their education by the white race. Richard Wright “showed that the discrimination among the white and the black races occurred in education aspect”

(Jismulatif et al., p. 200). It indicates that the ideology of racism influenced the education of blacks in America, where the blacks were not allowed to attend school with the white people. Besides, the black people were not allowed to continue their school to the higher level of education as recorded in the history of the black community's life in America.

On account of this racism and according to Jismulatif, "the black race was very difficult to get equal rights in education whereas the education was very important for blacks to improve their lives" (p. 199). Education can lift the level of the blacks into a good status by the white race. The discrimination experienced by the blacks in education aspect didn't only happen in term of prohibition in attending school with whites but also occurred in school segregation, the blacks were only allowed to study with the blacks fellow 'black school' and so was the whites "white school."

The similar happenings were also experienced by Bigger when he and his peers wanted to study in the white race school, because of he was black that he was forbidden to go to school there, as shown by the text stated in the discourse of *Native Son* "They built a big school and then drew a line around it and said that nobody could to it but those who lived within the line; that kept all the colored boys out" (Wright, p. 327). The text above shows the "dominance of the white race who distinguished treatment in education aspect between the whites and the blacks, where there was separation between the children of the blacks and the white race children" (Jismulatif et al., p. 200). This different treatment was due to the racist ideology which developed by the white race in America at that time.

2.2 Employment Aspect

The racist ideology bears a serious influence on the work of the black race in America, where they got a lowly job while whites get better jobs. As a result of this discrimination in employment aspect, many people who came from the blacks got jobs as slaves and as laborer like maid, gardener, and cooks. *Native Son's* discourse also shows the practice of discrimination against blacks in the employment aspect. Richard Wright "wants to describe the discrimination experienced by bigger as descendants of the black race. It can be seen from the following texts of the discourse" (Alwi, p. 131).

- (4) He had no job, for he regarded digging ditches for fifty cents a day as slavery; "I can't live on that," (Wright, p. 4).
- (5) "It was reported that several hundred Negro employees throughout the city had been dismissed from jobs" (Wright, p. 159).
- (6) "Most Negro businesses were funeral parlors; white undertakers refused to bother with dead black bodies" (Wright, p. 162).

The quotations (4), (5), and (6) are the examples of the racism in *Native Son* linguistic expressions which indicate the racism in the employment aspect. The Blacks were often treated unfairly in the employment aspect. To realize the injustice of the treatments, the white race made rules known as Jim Crow Laws (separate but equal). This happened in nearly all aspects of life, for example, education, social assistance, political, and legal protection. It can be described as two races that did not have a relationship, sense of sympathy, and they felt as though from a different planet, so

that the black race felt the "black world" and the "white world" and even they also believed the "black god and "white god."

2.3 Legal Affairs

The dark skin "were also often treated inhumanly in term of legal affairs, for example, in the South United States the blacks were often hanged without passing through the process of law or what is known as *lynching*" (Alwi, p. 127). It was very clearly seen in the 1930's, that as many as 154 blacks in the south were hung on wild gallows. At that time, the *lynching* punishment on blacks was customary in the southern part of United States. The racist ideology also affected the blacks' life in America. As the inferior race, "the blacks were often treated unfairly in term of legal affairs. When the blacks broke the rules, they were usually treated differently to the white race. It can be seen from the texts of the racism in *Native Son* novel. In this case, Wright wanted to show how whites treat blacks in the legal affairs.

(7) "That's all I ever did, and now I'm in this; they looking for me and when they catch me they'll kill me?" (Wright, p. 211).

(8) "What should I want to do anything? I ain't got a chance; I don't know nothing; I'm just black and they make the laws" (Wright, p. 218).

(9) "Kill 'im!"

"Lynch 'im!"

"That black sonofabitch!"

"Kill that black ape!" (Wright, p. 173).

The quoted texts of the *Native Son* (7), (8), and (9) above show that Wright poses that the Bigger as blacks were treated unfairly due to the reason that they are black and poor. The texts show that the blacks are powerless to fight the legal decision which is received from the court.

2.4 Public Facilities Use

The Racism had led to discrimination, segregation, and prejudice against blacks. As a result of this situation, the blacks' life was miserable. The treatment can be seen from the use of public facilities aspect, where the black race was prohibited from using public facilities belonging to the white race. The difference of using a common facility between the blacks and whites can be seen in the use of toilets, bus waiting rooms, churches, schools, hospitals, prisons, theaters, hotels, restaurant, etc. Racism raised the separation of the public facilities use among the blacks and whites. A similar different treatment can be seen from the event of the school separation between white and black children at Columbia in 1947. The separation of public facilities can also be seen in the texts of *Native Son* discourse which are as follow:

(10) "There are white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, white businesses and black businesses, white graveyards and black graveyards, and, for all I know, a white God and a black God" (Wright, p. 5).

(11) "He lived in the dingy shacks of the white landlords and refused to pay rent" (Wright 4).

- (12) "No white real estate man would rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live" (Wright, p. 161).
- (13) "Negro lived upon a common territory; separate from the bulk of the white population" (Wright, p. 5).

The texts of (10), (11), (12), and (13) above indicates that racism had made the blacks' life so miserable. The blacks were treated separately by whites. The above texts show as if the relationship of blacks and whites as human beings were from different planets. The impact of this racism was very influential on all aspects of the blacks' life. The injustice of the treatment had made the relationships of whites and blacks were against each other.

3. Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech that identifies something as being the same as some unrelated thing for rhetorical effect that usually provides clarity and uncovers hidden crisis about a personal identity. We will study the metaphor in *Native Son* from the following perspectives.

3.1 *The Rat*

Book one opens with Bigger stalking, killing and disposing of a black rat. The rat represents Bigger as the predator that violently kills the helpless victims Mary and Bessie. On the other hand it represents American society which preys upon Bigger, entraps him and finally executes him. After the murders, the police ruthlessly chase Bigger like a rat through the labyrinth of the Black Belt of South Side Chicago. They move through the burned out, abandoned and barely habitable buildings in a methodical manner, block by block, moving inward and inward until they trap him. Then, they lock him up and torture him by breaking him down psychologically until he signs a confession. They surround him by a mob that cries out against him in animal terms, "kill that black ape," and they finally execute him through electrocution. Simply, they dispose of him as Bigger once disposed of the rat. And, just as Bigger cried out "son of a bitch," when he captured the rat, so too do the police cry out "son of a bitch" when they ensnare Bigger.

3.2 *Hubris*

Hubris is the word given to the excessive pride exhibited by the tragic hero in ancient Greek drama, which brings about his downfall. It is hubris that ultimately causes Bigger's death. Filled with excitement after committing the seemingly ultimate crime killing and decapitating a white woman Bigger puts aside his doubts and his instinctual desire to run and save himself and repeatedly returns to the scene of the crime, the Dalton house. After he kills the Dalton girl, he buys cigarettes and beer for his buddies at the drug store with the murdered Mary's money which he took from her purse before stashing it in the garbage can. Then he shows off the roll of money to Bessie so she will consent to have sex with him after he snubbed her the evening before at Ernie's Kitchen Shack. Not content with the bank roll, he decides he is invincible and that he can gain a much larger sum of money if he pretends Mary has been kidnapped. Convinced he will succeed, he blames a man who attempted to become his friend. In a sense, he defies those in authority over him: Mr. Dalton, who lived "somewhere high up, distant like a god," and the preacher later on who comes to his cell. Before his capture, Bigger continually disregards his own voice of reason which calls on him to flee. Indeed, time and time again, he dampens down his own warning system, even when the reporters find the basement filling up with smoke. And, even though lawyer Max attempts to

explain poverty as an underlining cause of his crime: "Bigger's eyes lit with a bitter and feverish pride." Ultimately, it is his pride that traps Bigger like the rat at the opening of the novel.

3.3 *Blindness*

In the ancient Greek drama, Oedipus the tragic hero is convinced he can overcome the Oracle's predication that he will unwittingly kill his father and marry his mother. He blinds himself in a fit of rage after the prophecy is fulfilled. Throughout most of *Native Son*, Bigger seems to see everyone else as blind: "he did not look at them; they were simply blind people, blind like his mother, his brother, his sister, Peggy, Britten, Jan, Mr. Dalton, and the sightless Mrs. Dalton" (Wright, p. 329). The Daltons are blinded by their wealth which they make from the poor residing within Chicago's Black Belt and appease their guilt by helping African Americans with charity contributions. And, certainly the courtroom mob is blinded by racism in America, his mother is blinded by religion, Britten by fear and Jan by ignorance. However, throughout most of the novel, Bigger remains unaware of his own blindness, and this prevents him from taking advantage of the opportunities that are offered him in the form of jobs that will support his family, and schooling that will enhance his life and increase his employment opportunities. In Book three, Bigger is finally forced to confront his own blindness, and just when he finally gains insight, his vision becomes dimmed once more before being put to death.

Conclusion

The results of the analysis discourse found the artistic features of language in *Native Son*, through modality, racist ideology discourse and metaphor. Through the utilization of modalities "can," "could," "should," "will," "would," "might" and "may," the dominance of the white race as a superior race and the black race as inferior races is demonstrated. The results of the analysis of the social dimensions of cognition were named the dimension of analytical discourse. The analytical discourse dimension showed the whole process of production, use and dissemination of *Native Son*. The Blacks were treated by discrimination, segregation, and separation in education aspect, employment, legal affairs, public facilities use and socio-cultural. In the education aspect, the blacks were not allowed in white schools. In the work field, the blacks were given jobs as laborer or inferior. In term of legal affairs, the black race was not given legal protection, threaten injustice toward punishment given, and given a severe punishment when breaking the law. In term of public facilities use, the blacks were not allowed to use the facilities belong to the white race, and were not allowed to be in the same place with the whites. Finally, the application of metaphor as a figure of speech in the novel suggested the rebellion of power in Bigger against the impotent blacks around him while still impotent himself facing the whites.

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