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# OBAMA'S REMARKS ON TRAYVON MARTIN'S DEATH SEEN FROM CDA VIEWPOINTS: AN EXAMPLE OF AUTHENTIC ACADEMIC WRITING MATERIAL

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## Abstract
Racism and all its problems like injustice, inequality, discrimination, and so on, have become an interestingly never-ending topic to be discussed along the history. Even in America, a country which is so rich with its fighters of racial discrimination and injustice, this problem still occurs here and there. No matter how hard these heroes speak up their voices, this problem remains unsolved, or, at least, not entirely solved. One event, for example, happened on February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida, the United States of America. The victim was a young man named Trayvon Martin; an Afro-American high school student. George Zimmerman shot this seventeen-year-old teenager, which led to death. Zimmerman was a 28-year-old Hispanic American man. At that time, he worked as a watchman coordinator in the neighborhood. Martin temporarily stayed there. Obama, who was then the President of the United States, made a speech on Martin's death. This paper analyzes Barack Obama's speech from Discourse Analysis viewpoints, as well as the ideological and cultural discourse contained in the speech. In the text analysis, some significant aspects are discussed based on my understanding of SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics), that is, the aspects of connections, like mode, tenor, and field. Another central issue to be discussed in this paper is the ideological and cultural aspects of Obama's remarks upon Trayvon Martin's death. This speech can be a very good example of how an argumentative writing appeals so many people and makes them sympathize with the victim of the shooting. Through this paper, I hope that my own understanding of discourse analysis will be deepened, and readers will also gain some new horizon and knowledge of discourse study in general, including the cultural and ideological analysis of the text under study. I also hope that more convincing speeches of the authentic world like this one can benefit students of Academic Writing.

Keywords: authentic materials, academic writing, CDA, Obama's speech

## Introduction
Understanding a text, be it spoken or written, is an important part of discourse analysis. A speech or an oration is considered as spoken discourse, which is delivered in public. In this paper, I chose Barack Obama's spontaneous oration upon the death Trayvon Martin. He was a seventeen-year-old teenager

with African-American blood. Martin was shot by Zimmerman, a Hispanic, which finally led to his death. The main reason behind the selection of this article is because I am particularly interested in Obama' speeches, which, to a great extent, have impressed so many people in and outside his home country. Another reason is because as we know, the US is famous for its great figures of justice and equality for the African-American people, and also for the hard struggle of its heroes. Up to this moment, these heroes still struggle for justice and equality in the land where multi-racial ethnicities and nationalities live. We can name great people who are persistently struggling against racism like Martin Luther King, James Cone, the founder of black Liberation Theology (Fresh Air, 2008), Oprah Windfrey, also Barack and Michele Obama. Those two reasons have inspired me to analyze this article.

Seen from the content, this speech can be a good authentic material for Academic Writing class, in which students can learn about some important academic writing features as well as skills. For example, students can learn about common fallacies that may be found in the speech, like bandwagoning (everybody has the idea that…), appeal to ignorance (lack of evidences), overgeneralization, either-or thinking, hasty generalization, ed-hominem (attacking the opponent's personality instead of the issue), or false analogy (Kemper, et al, 2012). Another way of using this speech is by asking students to know what they are up against, or how to take a stand (Smalley, Ruetten, & Kozyrev, 2012; Dollahite & Haun, 2012). They also can learn about other writing skills, like summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, or referencing. In short, there are many rich lessons students can get about academic writing skills and knowledge from this speech.

**Theory**

This speech was originally delivered by Obama as personal remarks in an unscheduled statement to the media on July 19, 2013 (Cohen, 2013). At that time, President Obama himself came to the podium to address the case of Trayvon Martin. He talked about race problems, and "stand your ground laws" in the speech (Terkel, 2014).

Here is the outline of the speech (Bump, 2013). Altogether, there are 44 paragraphs in the speech.

**Table 1. The Outline of the Speech**

| | |
|---|---|
| Paragraphs 1-3 | Introduction |
| Paragraphs 4-5 | The legal process of the case in general |
| Paragraphs 6-13 | Personal opinions on racial problems |
| Paragraphs 14-20 | African-American community |
| Paragraphs 21-25 | Reflective statements and questions about African-American boys |
| Paragraphs 26-34 | Concrete things that can be done about state laws |
| Paragraphs 35-42 | Hopes on better conditions for African-American boys |
| Paragraphs 43-44 | Closing |

Due to the limitation of space, this paper will only cover the issues of connections, like "mode", "tenor" and "field".

Referring to Martin and Rose (2004, pp. 242-243), register analysis in SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics) deals with a dimension which involves tenor, mode, and field. Tenor concerns with relationships between interactants; while the one dealing with social activity is called field; and mode is related to the role of language. The table below, cited from Martin and Rose's (2004), will clarify.

**Table 2. Metafunctions**

| Metafunction | Content | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| Interpersonal | Tenor | Role relationship |
| Ideational | Field | Social actions |
| Textual | Mode | Part of language |

Details of tenor, mode and field form the text will be discussed below. Tenor, field, and mode together form the register of a text. They may be called register variables as well (Martin & Rose, 2004, pp.243-244). Now I will discuss the variables one by one.

***Mode***

According to Martin and Rose (2004, p.244), there is one important variable that mode has, that is, "the amount of work that language is doing related to what is going on". Martin and Rose further took an example of Vincent Lingiari's speech in which there are exophoric references referring to people, places, and things. They are materially present. The important white men refers to the Whites, us refers to Aboriginals, and here refers to this land where the Afro-Americans suffer from discrimination.

The important White men are giving us this land ceremonially, ceremonially they are giving it to us. It belonged to the Whites, but today it is in the hands of us Aboriginals all around here.

This kind of text is called context dependent, because we cannot process the participants' identification without any information from the situation. The key resource, which "unties" texts from situations, is the grammatical metaphors. This is due to their power to reconstrue activities as things. Hence, they break the iconic connections between linguistic and material activity. It will further transform social action into abstractions (Martin & Rose, 2004, p.245). Referring to Obama's speech, we can see how mode is used in paragraphs 8-12. I tried to present some intriguing statements from the speech.

> You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me, 35 years ago.
>
> And when you think about why, in the African-American community at least, there's a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it's important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a -- and a history that -- that doesn't go away. There are very few African-American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me.

> There are probably very few African-American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me -- at least before I was a senator. There are very few African-Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. Here we can see how the exophoric references referring to people, places, and things are materially present.

***Tenor***

The key variables in tenor are, Martin and Rose claim (2003, p. 248), power and solidarity. They are the "vertical and horizontal dimensions of interpersonal relations". This "power variable is used to generalize across genres, as far as equalities and inequalities of status are concerned", as Martin and Rose mention in their book, Working with Discourse (2004).

According to Martin and Rose (2004, p. 248), in postcolonial society, it is claimed that there are five dimensions of inequality: generation, gender, ethnicity, capacity, and class. Generation refers to "inequalities" which are related to maturation. Gender refers to "sex and sexuality-based difference". Ethnicity concerns with "racial, social, and cultural divisions", while incapacity refers to "disabilities of any kind". Class refers to "distribution of material resources", and it becomes the most fundamental dimension, since postcolonial economic order depends on it. Social semiotic coding orientations are manifested through "physical embodiment" and also "semantic style". The ways they work are culturally specific. In most texts, power and its relation to field must be carefully considered (Martin & Rose, 2004, p.248).

Citing from Poynton (1985), Martin and Rose (2004, p. 248) state that reciprocity of choice is a critical variable in power. "Social subjects of equal status construe equality". It is done by having access to the same kinds of choices. Subjects with unequal status will take up different kinds of choices.

Solidarity, which is the horizontal dimension of tenor, is used to generalize across genres. There are two principles that Poynton (1995) suggests: proliferation and contraction. Proliferation is the idea that the closer someone is to someone else, the more meanings she/he has to exchange. Sharing feelings is a kind of critical resource for a relationship. Therefore, proliferation is powerful. Contraction refers to the amount of work which is needed to exchange meanings. It also refers to the idea that the better someone knows someone else, the less explicitness is needed. Where there are cultural differences, contracted realization can be particularly excluding (in Martin & Rose, 2004, p.250).

In Obama's speech, solidarity can be seen in paragraph 19, in which Obama calls African-American people as "black folks". This is partly because Obama is a part of the African-American society, and he did experience things that were discriminating as he told in paragraphs 10-12. Also at the end of the speech, Obama did not address his audience as "ladies and gentlemen", but, "guys". This is due to his position and power as the President of the States, and he was addressing this speech to his people. Obama also address Americans as "folks" (para.22).

***Field***

The last variable of register is field. It concerns with a set of "activity sequences, which are oriented to some global purpose within institutions, family, community, or society" (Martin & Rose, 2004, p. 252). The sequences, the figures, and the taxonomies of participants together create expectations. This will be the basis for identifying fields. We have to consider expectations about what is going on.

Distinctive sequences, Martin and Rose (2004, pp. 252-253) claim, implicate distinctive events. Events implicate distinct participants, in relations to one another based on the compositions of a certain field. We can then explore different domains in life (differences between every day, technical, and institutional domains), and the apprenticeship. This is important to understand cultural differences related to communication. Field in Obama's speech can be seen from several domains in life as described in the following table.

**Table 3. Field in Obama's Speech**

| |
|---|
| African-American people<br>- African-American community (para.9)<br>- African-American men (para.10)<br>- African-Americans (para. 12)<br>- African-American boys (para. 20)<br>- Black folks (para. 19) |
| Trayvon Martin<br>- This (para.8) |

***The Context of Culture and Situation in the United States***

The speech delivered by Obama was a personal response upon the death of an African-American young boy, by a Hispanic-American, George Zimmerman. The event took place on February 26, 2013. The context of situation and culture – which is the continuing problem of racism in the US, is presented below.

As widely known, racial discrimination has been a big issue in the States. This has started since the slavery era. Native Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latin-Americans were the ones who suffered most from the heavy burden of legal sanction (Jordan, 2013). On the other hand, European-Americans, especially Anglo-Americans had privilege in terms of literacy, voting rights, citizenship, and some other aspects.

In the mid twentieth century, racial discrimination was banned in a large scale. It then began to be seen as socially unacceptable, and morally inappropriate. However, racism in politics still continues, and this can be reflected in socioeconomic inequality. The form of discrimination is indirect, and "racial stratification" still continues in housing, education, and governance (Jordan, 2013).

**Theory Application**

***How the Text is produced as a Social Practice***

This text is full of ideological contents. Obama expressed his deep concern

on the case of the shooting of Martin and also about the challenges faced by African-American people in America in a wider context. This problem is an example of the never-ending problem of racism in America. As widely known, this problem rooted from slave era in the seventeenth century up to the 1960s. It was in the middle of the 20th century when racial segregation was banned. It also began to be considered as "socially and morally unacceptable". Racism is reflected in socioeconomic inequality "racial stratification" continues and takes place in many aspects of life including housing, education, and government (Jordan, 2013). Seen from the social function, this text - which was originally a spoken speech by the President upon the death of a young African-American boy - is loaded with several significant messages.

First, this text shows Obama's bravery in bringing up the matters of racial issues, African American discrimination problems to be specific, which have been going on for many centuries. This is a kind of reflection on the on-going racism in America (para 16). He also talked about injustice that often happens to African-American people in the US (para 9, 10-12). He was not afraid that this speech would become an obstacle for winning another election. He had no worries at all, and he was not afraid of losing public sympathy. Instead, he freely and bravely criticized the system of law in Florida, also the state and local government (para. 26-34).

Secondly, besides showing Obama's bravery, this speech also reveals his intelligence. This is shown by the fact that he was able to make this personal, unscheduled speech. I assumed that Obama had little time to prepare this. Yet, he critically could see the matter of Martin's shooting from social and judicial points of view, which were quite objective, despite the fact that he was an African-American man himself. Asking his fellow people to move forward and live in unity is another wise and brilliant side of his leadership (para. 35-42).

Thirdly, this text shows Obama's great ability to empathize for the victims of injustice in America, by identifying Martin as his son and himself. He could brilliantly use language to make public picture this vividly. This can be found in paragraph 8, "You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me, 35 years ago.

***What the Text is about***

As mentioned previously, this text, originally a spoken speech by Barack Obama as response of the death of a young African-American boy, Treyvon Martin, talks about racism problems which is still happening in the Uncle Sam's country up to now. To make the discussion clearer, I presented the background of the shooting and a short biography of Obama below.

As mentioned above, Trayvon Martin was a seventeen-year-old African American teenager who was shot dead on February 26, 2012. He was shot in his temporary residence in Sanford, Florida, by George Zimmerman, a Hispanic. Zimmerman was the neighborhood watch coordinator in that area. Zimmerman shot Martin to death, and Martin did not have any weapon. Police came several minutes after the shooting took place. Zimmerman was arrested but then released after several-hour investigation.

The police chief explained that there was not adequate evidence to refute "Zimmerman's claim of having acted in self-defense. He further stated that Zimmerman "had a right to defend himself with lethal force" (Robles, 2012). After flows of thousands of protesters, Zimmerman was arrested and investigated. He was finally charged with murder, and the jury acquitted him of "second-degree murder" and "manslaughter charges" on July 13, 2013. This reminds me of a novel by Alan Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country (1948). This novel tells a story about a man named Stephen Kumalo. Kumalo was sorrowfully grieving of losing his own son, Absalom who was arrested and then hung to death for murdering Arthur Jarvis, a white man, who ironically was an anti-racism activist in South Africa.

It is told that Absalom killed Jarvis accidentally for self-defense, as he was afraid and shocked to see Jarvis when burgling into Jarvis' house. No matter how Absalom told the truth to the court about his innocence, he was convicted guilty of murdering Jarvis who was a white man. Jarvis was a kind of dream figure for the oppressed African people; someone who could be a solution for injustice in the land of South Africa. He died paradoxically in the hands of a man he stood for. Paton beautifully wrote about Kumalo's hopes that someday, freedom will come to South Africa, though he may not experience it, "Kumalo knows that he will die long before peace comes to South Africa, because there is so much fear among the people." (Cry, Beloved Country, Chapter 36).

***Obama's Short Biography***

Born on August 4, 1961, Barack Obama was a darling son of Barack Obama Sr. and Ann Dunham. Both parents were students at the University of Hawaii. Obama's father returned to Kenya after leaving for Harvard, and his mother then remarried an Indonesian oil manager. They moved to Jakarta when he was 6. Returning to the States, Obama was brought up by his grandparents. Attending Columbia University did not make Obama happy because of the high racial tension. Then, Obama went to Harvard Law School in 1990. He was elected "the first African-American editor of Harvard Law Review". He then worked in Chicago on voting-rights legislation, representing the victims of housing and employment discrimination. In the meantime, he began teaching at Chicago Law School. It was when he met Michelle Robinson, and the love story continued to marriage. She became Obama's fellow attorney. In 2004, he was elected the US Senate as a Democrat. Four years later, he got a chance to run for President. January 2009 was the time when he began his service as the 44$^{th}$ President of the US. He was then reelected in November 2012.

***Ideologies Represented in the Text: Discourse, Culture and Ideology***

According to Martin and Rose (2004, p.15), both ideology and power are interrelated. They run through language and culture. They position people within social context where they can have more or less power. Ideology and power can either open wide or make people's access to resources of meaning smaller. They further state that up to now, the most outstanding example was apartheid in South Africa and its ideological divisions. Racism in the United States is, in my horizon, another interesting example of the issue of ideology and power.

In line with Martin and Rose, Fairclough (1992, p. 23) in his book, Language and Power, mentions that "language is one strand of the social". He states, "All linguistic phenomena are social, but, not all social phenomena are linguistic". Fairclough states further that discourse involves "social conditions of productions and social conditions of interpretations". Social condition in this case is inter-related to the three levels of social organization, namely the level of social environment – where discourse occurs, social institution – which constitutes a wider matrix for discourse, and social levels as a whole (1992, p. 25).

Since language is related to social practice, people thus must analyze not only the text or the process of production and interpretation of the language. They must also see more deeply the relationship among the text, processes, and social conditions as well. There are three dimensions of discourse: description, interpretation, and explanation. Description concerns with "formal properties" in the text; while interpretation deals with "text and interaction". Explanation concerns with "relationship between interaction and social context" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 26).

In a capitalist society, Fairclough (1992) claims, economic production is the place where "social classes start", and the capitalist's power largely depends on the ability to control. "Ideological power" is significant to the economic and political power. It is the power to project whether someone's practices are universal and common sense. The significance exists because it is exercised in discourse (pp. 32-33).

Power relations, Fairclough explains, exist between social groupings in institutions. There are also power relations between men and women, and also between young and old, which have no connection to institutions. In reality, there is no transparent connection between class relations. However, class relations define the nature of society, and have basic influence of the society (p. 34). "Power relations are always relations of struggle", Fairclough asserts. Social struggle happens between various social groupings. Examples to this are relations between men and women, employers and workers, black and white, young and old, and so on. Class struggle is an important property of social system. It can be more or less intense, and can appear in any social developments. Any kind of power exercise takes place under social struggle (1992, p. 34).

Discourse types and orders vary across cultures. White middle class "gatekeepers" are "likely to constrain discourse types which can be drawn on the dominant cultural groups" (p. 47). Fairclough concludes that discourse is where power is exercised and enacted. There are also power relations behind discourse. In all cases, power is "won, held, and lost in social struggle". Talking about "power in discourse", Fairclough claims that discourse is the place where power resides. In terms of "power behind discourse", discourse is the stake of power. Fairclough adds that it is the control over discourse orders that becomes the powerful mechanism to sustain power (pp. 73-74).

Jorgensen and Phillips (2002, pp.60-64) strengthen the idea of relationship between discourse and social and cultural development in social domains. It is famous as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Citing from Fairclough and

Wodak, Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) mention five common features of CDA as follows.

The first is about the character of the social and cultural processes and structures. It is partly "linguistic discursive". It is partly through every day life's "discursive practices" that social and cultural change take place. The aim of CDA, Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) further state, is "to shed light on the linguistic-discursive dimension of social and cultural phenomena".

The second feature is discourse is a form of social practice. It constitutes the social world, but it is also constituted by other social practices. In CDA, language-as-discourse is a form of action that people can change the world through. Besides that, as Jorgensen and Philips (2002) claim, it is a form of action, which is socially and historically related with other social aspects.

The next feature is CDA engages in "concrete linguistic textual analysis" of language use in social interaction (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002). Language use should be analyzed in social context. Another feature is discourse functions ideologically. Discursive practices certainly contribute to the creation of unequal power relations between social groups (social groups refer to social classes, men-women relations, ethnic minorities and majority relations). The last feature is that CDA should be understood as critical approach, which is politically committed to social change.

Based on the theories above, I would like to say that this speech of Obama contains some ideological aspects, which are very deep and profound. The ideologies presented here are how racism still continues and becomes unavoidable in American society, which is known to be fighting earnestly against racial discrimination. The second ideology is the President's efforts to awaken the nation's awareness of the danger and disadvantages of racism. The last one is the President's hopes for a better America.

Besides all those values, this speech is also very rich of academic writing features if both students and lecturers dig it deeper. Students can learn how to summarize, how to paraphrase, how to start with what others are saying, how to defend one's stance, and learn about common fallacies as well.

## Conclusion

Analyzing an article is not an easy thing to do. We have to consider so many aspects beside the text itself, like the background of the article, the socio-political conditions at the time of writing. This field has tremendously gained an important place in educational research. This paper is an effort how I tried to see an article from discourse points of view. This has increasingly become an interesting phenomenon and it attracts may interest too.

It is expected that from this study, we gain better and deeper understanding of Discourse Analysis and also our comprehension of the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) gets better. The last is to say that we wish any reader of this paper also can gain something valuable, including lecturers and students of Academic Writing who are in search for authentic materials as model texts in their class.

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