

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN *THE GREAT DEBATERS* MOVIE

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Abstract

The Great Debaters serves as a powerful cinematic text that offers a multifaceted exploration of racial injustice and intellectual resistance through the strategic deployment of racist utterances—whether in the form of slurs, threats, institutionalized policies, or internalized oppression. The movie lays bare the linguistic mechanisms that reinforce racial hierarchies and social marginalization. The 26 utterances function as discursive acts that reflect and reproduce unequal power relations, as revealed through a critical discourse analysis grounded in Fairclough's model. Through the utterances, the viewers gain insight into the normalization of racism through everyday language and institutional discourse. One example of this was the juxtaposition of brutal historical references (such as the Willie Lynch narrative) with moments of rhetorical resistance (e.g., the assertion of Black identity and intellectual agency in debate scenes) that illuminates the ongoing struggle over meaning, representation, and voice. The movie acts as both a historical recounting and a pedagogical tool, inviting critical engagement with how language constructs racial identities and sustains systemic injustice. As a medium of reasoned argument, persuasion, and public voice, the utterances of the Wiley College debate team demonstrated a form of social activism and identity reclamation. This framing enables educators and students alike to connect historical struggles for civil rights with contemporary discourses surrounding race, equity, and education.

Keywords: Movie; Critical Discourse Analysis; Utterances

Abstrak

The Great Debaters sebagai teks sinematik yang kuat yang menawarkan eksplorasi multifaset tentang ketidakadilan rasial dan perlawanan intelektual melalui penyebaran strategis ucapan rasis—baik dalam bentuk cercaan, ancaman, kebijakan yang dilembagakan, atau penindasan yang diinternalisasi. Film ini mengungkap mekanisme linguistik yang memperkuat hierarki rasial dan marginalisasi sosial. Ke-26 ucapan berfungsi sebagai tindakan diskursif yang mencerminkan dan mereproduksi hubungan kekuasaan yang tidak setara, seperti yang terungkap melalui analisis wacana kritis yang didasarkan pada model Fairclough. Melalui ucapan-ucapan tersebut, penonton memperoleh wawasan tentang normalisasi rasisme melalui bahasa sehari-hari dan wacana kelembagaan. Salah satu contohnya adalah penjajaran referensi sejarah yang brutal (seperti narasi Willie Lynch) dengan momen perlawanan retorik (misalnya, penegasan identitas Kulit Hitam dan agensi intelektual dalam adegan debat) yang menerangi perjuangan yang sedang berlangsung atas makna, representasi, dan suara. Film ini berfungsi sebagai penceritaan sejarah sekaligus alat pedagogis, yang mengundang keterlibatan kritis dengan cara bahasa membangun identitas rasial dan mempertahankan ketidakadilan sistemik. Sebagai media argumen yang

beralasan, persuasi, dan suara publik, pernyataan tim debat Wiley College menunjukkan bentuk aktivisme sosial dan pemulihan identitas. Pembingkaian ini memungkinkan para pendidik dan siswa untuk menghubungkan perjuangan historis untuk hak-hak sipil dengan wacana kontemporer seputar ras, kesetaraan, dan pendidikan.

Kata kunci: Film; Critical Discourse Analysis; Ujaran

INTRODUCTION

The Great Debaters movie is more than a historical drama; it is a cinematic exploration of racial injustice and the power of resistance in 1930s America. The film follows the Wiley College debate team, composed of African American students who confront dominant white supremacist ideologies through intellectual engagement. Studying racial discrimination in this film is vital because it provides historical insights into systemic racism—issues that still permeate American society today. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), Critical Race Theory encourages scholars to examine historical narratives that expose the deeply entrenched structures of racial inequality. Thus, *The Great Debaters* serves as an effective educational tool for understanding how African Americans have historically resisted oppression through education and discourse.

Racial discrimination in *The Great Debaters* is portrayed not only through individual prejudice but also through institutionalized systems such as segregation, limited access to education, and biased law enforcement. These representations allow viewers—especially students—to critically analyze how race, power, and privilege intersect in American institutions. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue, the educational system often reproduces racial inequality, yet it can also be a space for challenging it. Through the struggles faced by the Wiley College debaters, the film illustrates how structural racism operates and persists, thereby reinforcing the

need for racial equity in educational settings today.

Another significant reason for studying racial discrimination in the film lies in its powerful portrayal of Black resilience and empowerment. Despite facing systemic racism and the harsh realities of the Jim Crow era—including lynching, segregation, and social marginalization—the characters uphold dignity, engage critically, and express resistance. Hooks (2000) underscores the importance of cultural representation in resisting racist ideologies, asserting that film and literature serve as vital counter-narratives. *The Great Debaters* contributes to this resistance by highlighting the intellectual and emotional strength of African Americans who confront social injustice through reasoned debate and solidarity.

Additionally, the film offers an emotionally engaging and accessible medium to examine complex issues of race and justice, both historically and in the present (see Harida et al, 2023; Nuryani et al, 2023; Erdianto & Arifin, 2024). It prompts reflection on the persistence of racial disparities and emphasizes the importance of dialogue, critical thinking, and activism. As Giroux (2001) explains, films that address social justice can foster critical pedagogy and civic engagement in educational settings. Analyzing racial discrimination in *The Great Debaters* can help students cultivate empathy and a deeper commitment to social change, making it a valuable resource for both educators and learners.

From a linguistic perspective, discourse in the film functions beyond the formal structures of language; it reveals how language is used purposefully within social contexts (see Harida et al, 2023; Kristyaningsih & Arifin, 2022; Putra et al, 2020). As Brown and Yule (1983) assert, discourse analysis focuses on language in use, linking linguistic forms to their communicative functions shaped by cultural and social influences. In this context, the movie's dialogue reflects various language functions which characters express identity, build relationships, challenge power, and create meaning in their struggle against racial oppression (see Luthfiana et al, 2020; Hidayati et al, 2022; Ningtyas & Arifin, 2025).

Supporting this analysis, previous research provides further insight into the portrayal of racial discrimination in film. Purasih (2016) applied critical discourse analysis to examine *Hidden Figures* and how African American women overcome both individual and institutional discrimination through resilience and determination. Maiza and Adi (2019) explored how Hollywood comedy films reflect persistent racial stereotypes, questioning the notion of a post-racial America. Yuliyana et al. (2024) identified individual, institutional, and structural discrimination in the film *Race*, emphasizing its emotional and psychological effects on Black individuals. Ro'is and Harida (2024) analyzed *The First Grader* and highlighted the lingering effects of colonialism and tribalism in postcolonial Kenya. Lastly, Sholihati and Purnama (2021) examined racial discrimination in *Where's The Money*, revealing how racism is often normalized and trivialized through humor in entertainment media.

These studies collectively demonstrate how discourse and cinematic narrative work together to depict and critique racial injustice. Like the aforementioned films, *The Great*

Debaters incorporates both visual and verbal discourses that reflect real-life inequalities and resistances. Through scenes, character actions, and utterances, the film presents rich material for discourse analysis, making it an ideal subject for scholarly investigation. Therefore, this research aims to find the Racial Discrimination in *The Great Debaters* Movie by Denzel Hayes Washington Jr through critical discourse analysis.

METHOD

As a scientific work, every discussion of method is used to analyze and describe a problem. The method itself serves as a basic to elaborate a problem, so a problem can be described and explained clearly and understandably. Bogdan and Taylor (2003:3). The writer used discourse/text-based study. The analysis that the writer chose to conduct the study was discourse analysis that is proposed by Fairclough and Wodak (1997). Here, the writer did the text analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation) and social analysis (explanation). In this study, the writer analyzed the movie using discourse analysis. From the movie, the writer used two kinds of analysis: textual and visual analysis. From them, the writer then described, interpreted and explained how the movie's discourse related to race discrimination. Then, the writer concluded the results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Based on the analysis, the researchers found utterances that belong to the racial utterances. In total, 26 utterances were categorized as racial utterances which gave the description of discrimination faced by African American people in 1930s. The findings are presented in the table 1 below.

Table 1: Racial utterances in *The Great Debaters* movie

	Utterances	Time
1.	You see, in most states, Negroes were denied birth certificates, which means I can lie about my age the rest of my life.	00:23:49,395
2.	They're changing the way Negroes in America think.	00:24:58,421
3.	You know how many Negro women practice law in this state?	00:36:19,788
4.	Even in the speech of a Negro professor. Somehow, "black" is always equated with failure.	00:43:49,539
5.	Town niggers. They think they're too good to get their hands dirty.	00:48:38,421
6.	He was the first Negro Ph.--	00:50:19,234
7.	Take the meanest... most restless nigger, strip him of his clothes in front of the remaining male niggers, female niggers, and nigger infants. Tar and feather him. Tie each leg to a horse facing an opposite direction, set him on fire, and beat both horses until they tear him apart in front of the male, female, and nigger infants. Bullwhip and beat the remaining nigger males within an inch of their life. Do not kill them, but put the fear of God in them, for they can be useful for future breeding.	00:53:49,539
8.	Anybody know who Willie Lynch was? Anybody? Raise your hand.	
9.	No one? He was a vicious slave owner in the West Indies. the slave-masters in the colony of Virginia were having trouble controlling their slaves, so they sent for Mr. Lynch to teach them his methods.	
10.	The word "lynching" came from his last name. His methods were very simple, but they were diabolical. Keep the slave physically strong but psychologically weak and dependent on the slave master. Keep the body, take the mind.	
11.	I...and every other professor on this campus are here to help you... to find, take back, and keep your righteous mind... because obviously you have lost it. That's all you need to know about me, Mr. Lowe.	00:54:38,421
12.	With the best Negro college in the state?	01:16:21, 428
13.	If the state of Mississippi would have turned their heads each and every time a Negro was lynched, shouldn't the federal government intervene?	01:18:19,597
14.	We'll be the first Negro college in America-- well, one of the first Negro colleges in America-to ever debate a white college.	01:19:38, 183
15.	Resolved— Negroes should be admitted to state universities. My partner and I will prove that blocking a Negro's admission to a state university is not only wrong, it is absurd. The Negro people are not just a color in the American fabric. They are the thread that holds it all together. Consider the legal and historical record.	01:19:37,881

16. May 13, 1865: Sergeant Crocker, a Negro, is the last soldier to die in the Civil War.	01:20:49, 953
17. 1918: The first U.S. soldiers decorated for bravery in France are Negroes Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts.	
18. 1920: The New York Times announces that the "N" in Negro would hereafter be capitalized.	
19. Dr. W.E.B. DuBois-- he's perhaps the most eminent Negro scholar in America.	01:38:42,111
20. My opponent so conveniently chose to ignore the fact that W.E.B. DuBois is the first Negro to receive a Ph.D from a white college called Harvard.	01:41:19,788
21. Dr. DuBois, he adds, "It is impossible-- impossible for a Negro to receive a proper education at a white college."	01:43:40, 942
22. The most eminent Negro scholar in America is the product of an Ivy League education.	01:45:31, 153
23. You see, DuBois knows all too well the white man's resistance to change.	01:46:20,792
24. But that's no reason to keep a black man out of any college.	01:51: 59, 493
25. If someone didn't force upon the South something it wasn't ready for, I'd still be in chains, and Miss Booke here would be running from her old Master! That means better textbooks for that child than for that child. Oh, I say that's a shame, but my opponent says today is not the day for whites and coloreds to go to the same college, to share the same campus, to walk in the same classroom. Well, would you kindly tell me when is that day gonna come?	01:54:32,421
26. A rich businessman steals bonds, he goes to Congress.	01:56:20,878

Discussion

Datum 1:

"Tie each leg to a horse facing an opposite direction, set him on fire, and beat both horses until they tear him apart in front of the male, female, and nigger infants. Bullwhip and beat the remaining nigger males within an inch of their life. Do not kill them, but put the fear of God in them, for they can be useful for future breeding. Anybody know who Willie Lynch was? Anybody? Raise your hand. No one? He was a vicious slave owner in the West Indies. The slave-masters in the

colony of Virginia were having trouble controlling their slaves, so they sent for Mr. Lynch to teach them his methods. The word 'lynching' came from his last name. His methods were very simple, but they were diabolical. Keep the slave physically strong but psychologically weak and dependent on the slave master. Keep the body, take the mind."*

The textual analysis of datum 1 is it shows violent, graphic, and historical vocabulary ("bullwhip," "tear him apart," "slave," "lynching") evokes visceral imagery of brutality. It also shows Metaphor as in

the phrase “Keep the body, take the mind” encapsulates the logic of psychological domination. Use of “nigger” multiple times mirrors historical dehumanization, not as endorsement but to confront that reality directly. It begins with explicit violence, shifts to rhetorical questioning, then a didactic lesson about Willie Lynch. Datum 1 was delivered in an educational setting; this utterance is part of a lecture meant to awaken historical consciousness and critical thinking among students. It refers to the controversial and widely debated “Willie Lynch Letter” as historical evidence of racial control. The speaker positions themselves as a revealer of suppressed knowledge and positions students as the uninformed or unaware.

The passage reflects the logic of institutional slavery: dehumanization for the purposes of control and exploitation. This excerpt critically exposes how white supremacy-maintained control through psychological tactics, not just physical coercion. By invoking this history graphically, the speaker seeks to shock the audience into recognizing the long-lasting ideological roots of racism. The discourse challenges the sanitization of American history and emphasizes the importance of reclaiming mental freedom.

Datum 2:

“I...and every other professor on this campus are here to help you... to find, take back, and keep your righteous mind... because obviously you have lost it. That’s all you need to know about me, Mr. Lowe.”

The phrase “Righteous mind” implies moral and intellectual clarity rooted in justice. The ellipses show hesitation or emphasis, dramatizing the act of reclaiming consciousness. “Take back” suggests it was

stolen; “keep” implies struggle; “you have lost it” points to alienation or internalized oppression. Since this dialogue was uttered by a professor addressing a student — specifically a young Black man (Mr. Lowe) — within a university setting. The professor frames education not as skill acquisition but as the recovery of self-worth, agency, and cultural awareness. This moment follows the previous historical lecture and continues the theme of mental emancipation.

Datum 2 shows a direct act of discursive resistance — challenging the student to wake up from ideological conditioning. The phrase “you have lost it” points to how systems of oppression can strip marginalized individuals of their critical consciousness. Rooted in African-American traditions of liberation pedagogy, the utterance centers mental emancipation as a core goal of education.

Datum 3:

“If someone didn’t force upon the South something it wasn’t ready for, I’d still be in chains, and Miss Boone here would be running from her old Master! And because of racism, it would be impossible for a Negro to be happy at a southern white college today. Yes, a time will come when Negroes and whites will walk on the same campus and we will share the same classrooms. As long as schools are segregated, Negroes will receive an education that is both separate and unequal.”

Words like “chains,” “Master,” and “segregated” evoke the historical reality of slavery and Jim Crow. The statement contrasts present injustice with future hope (“a time will come...”), using rhetorical parallelism and repetition (“same campus... same classrooms”). This datum used emotive, prophetic, and assertive, using historical reference to justify present struggle.

This is a debate speech where the speaker appeals to moral authority and shared history. The speaker assumes an informed audience, possibly resistant, and seeks to unsettle their comfort with segregation. This utterance critiques both historical and institutional racism in education. It invokes past atrocities to argue for integration, exposing how racism continues to structure opportunity and access. It aligns with Civil Rights discourse and positions the speaker as a visionary challenging systemic inequity.

Datum 4:

“By Oklahoma’s own reckoning, the state is currently spending five times more for the education of a white child than it is spending to educate a colored child. That means better textbooks for that child than for that child.”

This datum used comparative statistic followed by its practical implication. The use of neutral institutional language (“spending,” “education”) were contrasted with its racially unequal application. It also used repetition: “That child... that child” drives home inequality.

The utterance is situated in a formal debate, using government data to discredit institutional claims of fairness or equality. It appeals to logic and equity, challenging the audience to confront the empirical basis of discrimination.

Datum 4 highlights systemic economic inequality in public education as a function of race. The speaker uses state data against the state itself, exposing the hypocrisy of American ideals versus racial realities, and positioning the discourse as counter-hegemonic.

Datum 5:

“Oh, I say that’s a shame, but my opponent says today is not the day for whites and coloreds to go to the same college, to

share the same campus, to walk in the same classroom. Well, would you kindly tell me when is that day gonna come?”

The use of sarcasm in “that’s a shame” and rhetorical questioning challenge passive racism. The use of repetition: “Same college... same campus... same classroom” emphasizes denied integration. The use of pronoun: “My opponent says...” positions the speaker morally above the opposing view.

This utterance was delivered in the context of formal debate to expose moral evasion by the opposition. The speaker provokes the audience to acknowledge the absurdity of deferring justice. This is a call for immediate racial justice. It critiques the paternalistic logic of “not yet” that white moderates historically used to delay integration, aligning with Civil Rights-era impatience with slow reform.

Datum 6:

“A hungry Negro steals a chicken, he goes to jail. A rich businessman steals bonds, he goes to Congress.”

This datum used parallel structure: “X steals Y, he goes to Z” draws stark contrast of prejudice for African American. The lexical juxtapositions: “Hungry Negro” vs. “rich businessman” emphasizes class and race disparity. The tone of this utterance was condemning, ironic, and provocative.

The speaker contrasts justice as applied to the oppressed versus the elite with punchline-like rhetorical device in a persuasive context. The audience is expected to recognize the injustice in unequal consequences for crime. This utterance highlights systemic racism and classism in the American legal system. It critiques not only race but the economic structure that privileges the white and wealthy. It invokes social realism to critique the illusion of equal justice under law.

Datum 7:

“If we eliminate Howard, we will have beaten the two best Negro colleges in America, and I can guarantee you that I will see to it that Harvard does not ignore that.”

The use of dictions which were related to competition such as “Eliminate,” “beaten,” “guarantee” reflects academic rivalry. The phrase “Negro colleges” sets racial boundary lines. Its reference to Harvard signals pursuit of elite recognition. The utterance was spoken within an aspirational Black academic space, emphasizing strategic victories to gain institutional legitimacy. It emphasizes positions success as a tool to demand recognition from elite (white) institutions. The speaker engages with respectability politics and uplift ideology — suggesting that excellence can pierce the veil of racial exclusion. Yet it also reveals the structural barrier: Black achievement must surpass to even be noticed by dominant white institutions.

The Great Debaters utterances illustrate how discourse functions both to reveal racial injustice and to contest dominant ideologies. Throughout the movie, we see how these texts are textually structured to dramatize and contrast inequality between Black and White in America. The utterances were embedded in larger social structures of segregation, white supremacy, and resistance.

Though the utterances which were produced in institutional contexts like debate, where marginalized speakers claim rhetorical space, it turned into discursive acts of resistance, speaking back to the systems that seek to silence or erase them. These utterances serve as historical reflections as well as illustration how language not only reflects oppression but can be used to challenge and dismantle it. Fairclough’s CDA reveals that the legacy of slavery and the need

for mental liberation are inextricably linked through discourse. While one recounts the horror of domination, the other represents a call to reclaim dignity and intellect — a dialectic of trauma and transformation.

CONCLUSION

The Great Debaters serves as a powerful cinematic text that offers a multifaceted exploration of racial injustice and intellectual resistance through the strategic deployment of racist utterances—whether in the form of slurs, threats, institutionalized policies, or internalized oppression. The movie lays bare the linguistic mechanisms that reinforce racial hierarchies and social marginalization. The 26 utterances function as discursive acts that reflect and reproduce unequal power relations, as revealed through a critical discourse analysis grounded in Fairclough’s model. Through the utterances, the viewers gain insight into the normalization of racism through everyday language and institutional discourse. One example of this was the juxtaposition of brutal historical references (such as the Willie Lynch narrative) with moments of rhetorical resistance (e.g., the assertion of Black identity and intellectual agency in debate scenes) that illuminates the ongoing struggle over meaning, representation, and voice.

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