

# Black Lives Matter: Towards a Proposal

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## ABSTRACT

*In this paper, we examine the utterance "Black Lives Matter" from a linguistic purview. A linguistic analysis of the utterance can be explained not only in terms of literal and non-literal propositions, but also in terms of how the arrangement of language expresses meaning(s). This paper explores Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory of Communication, cited in Xinyue Yao [1], and contends that: the figurative potential of the utterance "Black Lives Matter" is a product of how the words are patterned (combined); unintended negative connotations are conveyed about Black because the topic relevance that the decoder works out in processing "Black Lives Matter", is neither predictable nor limited; the utterance "Lives of Black Matter" is a good substitute for "Black Lives Matter".*

**KEYWORDS:** *Black Lives Matter, Lives of Black Matter, Black, Relevance Theory of Communication, figurative language, word-patterning, racial discrimination.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this study, we use the upper case form "Black" to make reference to "people known as Black" and the lower case form "black" to refer to "a type of colour". But at sentential initial position, we also use the upper case form "Black" to make reference to "a type of colour". We use the lower case plural form "whites" to refer to "people who belong to a race of people who have pale skin (cf. Hornby A. S. [2])". Black Lives Matter (henceforth "the Matrix") is a front-burner struggle slogan. Shared knowledge of relevant states-of-affairs is instrumental in decoding the Matrix. Bosco et al. [3] submit that "conversation is a two-fold activity in which the participants form utterances that are products of shared knowledge ..." In processing language use, the decoder is poised to infer the extra-linguistic (pragmatic), literal and non-literal meanings. Allan [4] views extra-linguistic elements of language use as "worlds-spoken-of". Levinson [5] argues that "one of the motivations of research in pragmatics might then be to establish effects of the uses of language on language structure." It is necessary for utterances to be processed to avoid ambiguities and enhance the flow of communication. Before we proceed to analyze the Matrix, the literature of Black Lives Matter is worthy of attention.

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant because:

- the researchers do not know of any other contemporary research that examines the linguistic pitfall in the utterance "Black Lives Matter"; and

- the study proposes for the first time in the literature, "Lives of Black Matter" as a good substitute for the Matrix.

### Black Lives Matter

Russell Rickford [6] makes an elaborate submission on Black Lives Matter:

Born as a Twitter hashtag, Black Lives Matter has evolved into a potent alternative to the political paralysis and isolation that racial justice proponents have faced since the election of Obama. In just over two years, the young movement has reinvigorated confrontation politics, giving voice to a popular and righteous rage, establishing a new touchstone of grassroots resistance, and ending the acquiescence that has crippled progressive forces in the age of Obama. The upsurge, which has centered on the crucial, galvanizing issue of police misconduct, also shows signs of addressing larger questions of social inequality.

In the US, police brutality and extrajudicial killing are common in the traditional media, and the victims of such heinous crimes are Black/African Americans. Michelle Alexander [7] notes that "enforcing racial hierarchy has been

a central task of policing since the days of slave patrols ... the regulation of black bodies, the harnessing of black surplus labor ...”

Since the death of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter protests have become widespread across the world, giving rise to different protest slogans (e.g. “I can’t breathe”) as in figure 1 below:

Russell Rickford [6] submits that “Black Lives Matter began, quite modestly, as #BlackLivesMatter. The hashtag was created in 2013 by Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi – California and New York-based organizers active in incarceration, immigration, and domestic labor campaigns – after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder in Florida of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin.” In countries where state-induced racial subjugation abounds, there are usually strong agitations and resentments. Edward [8] is instructive on this claim. Essentially, the Movement transcends reformism, and therefore pursues a revolutionary course. This explains why it refuses to have ties with politics.

It is about among other concerns, the economic and political disadvantages that Black suffer, the underpinnings of white supremacy, gender inequality, modification of the insurgency that ravishes contemporary world, agitation against police brutality, human rights violation and state-induced racial marginalization and subjugation<sup>1</sup>.

Russell Rickford [6] submits that “by organizing vigils, rallies, and other events in the name of murdered women and girls, campaigns such as ‘Say Her Name’ have fought the erasure of marginalization of the stories of black women, who face stunning rates of police assault and incarceration.”

### Theoretical Anchorage

Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory of Communication elucidates how meaning is worked out of an utterance, given the fact that an utterance has topic of discourse. In this study, the analysis is hinged on the Relevance Theory of Communication which explains that in processing an utterance for meaning, the decoder’s thought is directed at one state-of-affair or the other, represented by the utterance. To make an



Source: Russell Rickford (2016: 34)

utterance “mean”, or “easy to mean” – that is, to make its topic relevance easy to situate and process, the decoder inevitably begins a deductive process determined by both linguistic and extra-linguistic variables. This view aligns with Fowler [9] who submits that “linguistic structure is not arbitrary. It is determined and motivated by the functions it performs.” In a similar vein, Adegbija [10] posits that “language use is not incidental. It is of credit.” A successfully processed utterance, according to Sperber and Wilson, is then said to be germane to its topic of discourse. The theory explains that topic relevance is optimal if it is sufficient for the decoder’s processing.

### Textual Analysis

In this section of the paper, we examine two basic utterances generated from our interpretation of “Black Lives Matter”:

- (a) Lives of Black matter;
- (b) Lives that are black matter.

Unlike “Black Lives Matter”, “Say Her Name” has a clear, non-figurative, literal meaning. In (b), negative attributes are ascribed to people who have black/dark skin; there is a sense in which the utterance implies that “even though their lives are black, they matter (are important)”. “Black skin” is not offensive if “Black” obtains at sentential initial position, but “Black lives”, is. Unlike “Black”, “lives” refers to all humans irrespective of the colour of their skin. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (p.145) defines “black” as:

- having the very darkest colour like coal or the sky at night;
- without light;
- completely dark;
- belonging to a race of people who have dark skin;
- connected with black people.

In this study, we contend that the lives of those who have dark skin are not black, even though their skin is black. The Matrix is even more offensive in negation, because in clauses of negation, “Black” is seemingly more figurative as it condemns “Lives” strongly; the extended meaning is inflated as in “Black lives do not matter”. When other words are added to the Matrix, a very offensive utterance is produced even in a non-negative clause as in when a speaker tells his interlocutor, “Black lives matter to you.” Scholars contend that establishing a dichotomy between performatives and constatives remain problematic, because an encoder can use a particular verb in a way that either makes the action implicit or explicit. In this study, we hold the view that like verbs, other word-classes used in a linguistic stretch can determine what an utterance communicates. The negative connotations ascribed to people

who have dark skin, is not justifiable, considering their incredible performances in all walks of life. In the US, a very large number of Black are highly educated. They are among the best brains across disciplines. An expression such as the Matrix, which is ideologically and philosophically deployed as a slogan for a global struggle such as Black Lives Matter, should be void of polysemy and ambiguity.

The Oxford Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (p. 899) defines “life” as:

- the ability to breathe, grow, reproduce, etc. which people, animals and plants have before they die and which objects do not have;
- the state of being alive as a human;
- an individual person’s existence.

Those people referred to as Black do not lack any of the above dictionary meanings. There is none of the meaning entries for “life” that reveals superiority of whites over Black. Therefore, at the deep structure level analysis of the word “life”, whites and Black are equal; see the works of grammarians (e.g. Ross [11] and Lakoff [12]) including those who are immersed in transformational generative grammar for insights on deep and surface structure analysis. Fodor [13] submits:

Once syntactic structures are allowed to contain universal semantic elements as their terminal symbols, the syntactic deep structures of sentences can serve as their semantic representations. The interpretive semantic component can be dispensed with entirety – hence the name “generative semantics”. The derivation of a surface structure begins with the generation of a semantic representation which is simultaneously a syntactic deep structure and this is then mapped by the successive application of syntactic transformations onto a surface structure. There is no LEVEL of structure, like the standard LEVEL of deep structure, which mediates the correlation of semantic representations with surface structures. The rules which operate on structures containing semantic elements are claimed to have exactly the same general formal properties as the more familiar syntactic transformations which apply at later stages of derivations.”

We align with scholars who hold the view that special meaning is parasitic upon language. Given the fact that meaning is a continuum, the decoder who is aware of the topic relevance of “black” – the negative dictionary meanings of the word – can recreate the utterance “Black Lives Matter” to derive other context-driven utterances such as the ones below:

- (c) Black Lives of the US Matter;
- (d) Black Sheep of the Family Matter.

Indeed, (c) and (d) are products of the fact that as the Matrix

makes the decoder focus on the meaning of the individual words, different ideas invade the mind, including the negative meanings of “black” in the dictionary. Consider dictionary meanings of “black”:

**ANGRY:** full of anger or hatred

**DEPRESSION:** without hope

**EVIL:** evil or immoral

Like “Black Lives”, other expressions which reveal negative or non-literal connotations of “black” abound in the dictionary:

black humour;

black comedy;

black deeds;

black look;

black day.

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English submits that if “Black” “means ‘a member of a race of people who have dark skin’, it is more common in the plural. It can sound offensive in the singular. Instead, you can use the adjective (‘a black man/woman’) ... (p. 145).” It is common knowledge that whereas people ascribe “purity” to “white” (colour), they ascribe “evil” to “black”. In addition, whereas “white” depicts “clean”, “black” depicts “dirty”.

Within the framework of Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory of Communication, we posit that (a), (b), (c) and (d) have discourse topics which impinge on the decoder’s deductions in the form of literal and non-literal propositions. However, topic relevance depends on different linguistic constraints, including word-patterning<sup>2</sup>. Acheoah [14] makes critical submissions on how the positions of linguistic units in a stretch, determine the communication of messages. The semantics of “Black Lives Matter” is essentially its sense representations – its socially realistic appendages. Given the “polysemic” attribute of “Black” as a word in isolation, the decoder of the Matrix is expected to work out the literal meaning, not any non-literal propositions that are implied by the utterance<sup>3</sup>. Acheoah [15] explains that sensitivity to the external relations of an utterance is crucial to the pragmatics of encoding and decoding utterances.

Commenting on the potentials of language to communicate varied meanings, Gilbert Lazard [16] posits that “language and speech are contrasted as a system and its manifold innumerable actualizations. A language is a system of potentialities. Practically each grammatical or lexical unit has a whole range of potential uses: in the dictionary, more often than not, a word has “several meanings”: polysemy is normal and almost

universal. On one hand, utterances take place in particular situations, at specific points of time and space, among a lot of concrete circumstances. All linguistic units are supposed to assume a precise meaning (except in case of intentional or fortuitous ambiguity) and, last but not least, they often have a specific reference.” We strongly contend that the combination of words in the Matrix is the reason for its ambiguity. Linguists agree that word order (word combination) is essentially part of structure. Factually, the structure of a stretch of utterance is instrumental in the communication of message. The word-class of the constituent words in a linguistic stretch, determines the normative rules to apply. This view corroborates John Kearns cited in Savas [17] who notes that “the fundamental semantic feature of a linguistic act is its structure, the proper object of semantic studies. Acts, not expressions, have meanings or are meaningful, but expressions are the bearers of syntactic features. An expression is a syntactic item. Expressions belong to syntactic categories, like the categories of noun, verb, noun phrases and adjectives. Word order is a syntactic feature. So are agreement features like gender, number and case. Although syntactic and semantic feature do not even characterize the same objects, a linguistic act has both a semantic structure and a syntactic character. This character is constituted by the expressions used and their syntactic feature.”

## Discussion

This study makes it clear that the meaning of an utterance is revealed not only by its constituent words, but also by how such words are patterned (combined) for effective communication. From classical to contemporary time, scholarly works abound for the elucidation of “meaning”. The intractable and versatile nature of meaning, inform the analysis of Black Lives Matter in this study. Interestingly, Leech and Short [18] assert that “perhaps the best known book ever written on semantics, that which C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards published in 1923, had the very title *The Meaning of Meaning*, and contained, on pp. 186-7, a list of as many as twenty-two definitions of the words, taking different non-theoretical starting points. Here ... is a selection of the meanings given:

- an intrinsic property;
- the other words annexed to a word in the dictionary;
- the connotation of a word;
- the place of anything in a system;
- the practical consequences of a thing in our future experience;
- that to which the user of a symbol actually refers;
- that to which the user of a symbol ought to be referring (e.g. the encoder of the Matrix ought to refer to “Lives of Black” rather than “Black Lives” – emphasis, ours);



- that to which the user of a symbol believes himself to be referring;
- that to which the interpreter of a symbol:
  - (a) refers;
  - (b) believes himself to be referring;
  - (c) believes the user to be referring.”

The communicative value of a proposition/predication depends to a very large extent, on how the encoder makes inference-making an easy task. A particular utterance can convey different meanings to different decoders as a result of different factors, including the varied mental states of the decoders. For example, a person whose family members have labeled as “Black sheep of the family” will interpret “Black Lives Matter” differently from another person whose family members have labeled as “White sheep of the family”. Level of knowledge of the operative language – the language used for any on-going discourse – can also determine how linguistic stretches are interpreted. The potency of utterances to invoke existential phenomena is essentially their topic relevance. Utterances have referents (discourse topics) that can readily and appropriately be picked out from the universe of discourse – our real world. Disambiguation is a task that the decoder of an utterance undergoes in the process of inferring meaning. Indeed, there is connection between an utterance and its relational phenomena that “invade” the mind when the utterance is uttered. Black Lives Matter is less felicitous in terms of the encoder’s intended message or literal proposition<sup>4</sup>; its relevance or optimal relevance is made individualistic and extended by its non-literal semantic potential. Meaning is not exhaustive, and the use of language to convey meaning is skill-based. Alston cited in Adeyemi [19] posits that “the meaning of a word is the idea that the word brings forth in the speaker or hearer. It is assumed that in uttering a word, some idea exists in the mind of the speaker and his uttering the word will evoke the same idea in the mind of the hearer.” So long as speakers and hearers have their own individualistic knowledge of the normative properties of the operative language, either of them can ascertain instances of flaw in the use of the language in a communication event/text. Charles Kreidler [20] remarks elaborately on speakers’ mastery of the conventions of their language:

1. Speakers know, in a general way, whether something is or is not meaningful in their language;
2. Speakers of a language generally agree as to when two sentences have essentially the same meaning and when they do not ...
3. Speakers generally agree when two words have essentially the same meaning – in a given context ...
4. Speakers recognize when the meaning of one sentence

contradicts another sentence ...

5. Speakers generally agree when two words have opposite meanings in a given context ...

Indeed, much more pertinent to this study is the seventh item of the submission: “Some sentences have double meanings; they can be interpreted in two ways. Speakers are aware of this fact because they appreciate jokes which depend on two-way interpretation ...” Mastery of the norms of language is crucial for using language in real life situations. In this regard, we situate Black Lives Matter within the universe of discourse – the discrete, varied context of situations in which any utterance be it a word or a stretch is deployed for illocutionary purpose(s). Gbenga Ibileye [22] posits that “discourse analysts believe that the real value of human language is that it is used by humans in real communicative situations. It is in the contextual ideation of language in this way that the real essence of language emerges. In saying this, we are mindful of the situation of language as being created by persons, in some physical, psychological, cultural or social contexts ...”

Within the purview of discourse analysis, Black Lives Matter is a text. This paper is immersed in the idea that texts have external properties which make them produce fascinating, infinite meanings. Considering Johnstone’s [23] elaborate submission on the term “text”, it is easy to understand why the encoder and decoders of the Matrix are engaged in its social underpinnings:

We obviously need to think about what our “text” is about, since clearly what a person is talking about has a bearing on what is said and how it is said. We also need to think about who wrote it or signed it, who is thought, in its particular socio-cultural context, to be responsible for what it says, who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influence what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse, and about what its medium (or media) of production has to do with what it is like. We need to think about the language it is in, what that language encourages speakers and writers to do and what it is relatively difficult to do in that language. We need to think about the text’s structure and how it fits into larger structures of sets of texts and sets of interactions.”

Indeed, a linguistic analysis of an utterance presupposes giving considerations to any possible contextual nuances that facilitate the interpretation of the utterance. Context therefore remains very crucial to language study. According to Butari [24]:

... context is viewed from the pragmatic point in terms of knowledge of what both the speaker and hearer can assume to know and how that knowledge guides the use of language

and the interpretation of utterances. It is therefore crucial to understand the relationship between language and society and how language use is influenced by the social context ... the linguistic context of a word or words therefore has a strong effect on what we think they mean. Words therefore generally co-occur together to give us an insight into what they mean. According to Adegbija (1999:192), in order to fully understand the linguistic context, there is need to examine questions such as: What are the other words appearing in the environment of a particular word used? What do they mean? What do they imply within the physical and socio-cultural setting?

## Conclusion

Black Lives Matter is an ideological construct as it clearly reveals not only the identity of the encoder, but also the identities of the two categories of the target audience: people who have dark skin; and whites. Gbenga [21] rightly notes that "... discourse shows us humans as using language to do things and to depict identity in the discourse that we so produce. This is why studying discourse has a vast potential of revealing the true nature and essence of human relations." In this study, we examine the linguistic and extra-linguistic implications of the Matrix. According to Gee [22] "we study language not just as an abstract system ('grammar'), but in terms of actual utterances or sentences in speech or writing in specific contexts of speaking and writing and reading<sup>5</sup>." The hashtag form ("##BlackLivesMatter") is perhaps the source of the error in Black Lives Matter. This is not surprising because we are aware of the orthography of the internet world, in which grammar does not strictly inform how expressions are constructed. Unfortunately, in re-expressing "##BlackLivesMatter" to become "Black Lives Matter", the encoder has introduced a new perception into the slogan: intra-racial discrimination. This is why this study proposes conclusively, that "Lives of Black Matter" is a better substitute for "Black Lives Matter".

## Notes

1. According to Russell Rickford [6] "questions of gender and sexuality appear to have generated the most significant fissures within Black Lives Matter. Although black women have been on the forefront of the movement, some supporters continue to frame the struggle in terms of putatively masculine prerogative of self-defense."

2. There are many contemporary textbooks on English grammar. They equip readers with good understanding of how adjectives are patterned (combined) in English language.

3. Another word which exemplifies polysemy is "bark" (bark of a tree; bark of a dog).

4. See Austin [25] for good grasp of felicitous and infelicitous speech acts.

5. Utterances are meaning-laden because they are context-driven. This view corroborates Gbenga [21] who submits that "for a piece of language to be described as discourse, it must be considered meaningful, first from the encoder (speaker or writer) and more importantly, by the decoder (hearer or readers). The features that make the expression meaningful are determined by the structural rules of the language."

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