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## Racial Swearing in Compliments on X: A Pragmatic Perspective

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### Abstract

*Few realize that swearing is not always used to express negative emotions. It can also be utilized to convey positive feelings, such as compliments. Swearing in compliments is a phenomenon identified on X, the social media platform that was formerly known as Twitter. The purpose of this study is to examine the pragmatic meaning and the pragmatic function of racial swearing in compliments on X. This study is classified as descriptive qualitative research. The data of this study consisted of racial swearing in the compliment utterances on X. The observational method was used to gather the data. In the meantime, the data were analyzed using the identity method by referring to the theories of Hughes (2006), Kreidler (2002), Ljung (2011), and Spears (2000). The results of the data analysis are presented by using informal method. The study's findings demonstrate that the racial swearing in compliments on social media X has the pragmatic meaning of 'guy'. In addition, it has pragmatic functions as noun supports and anaphoric use of epithets. As a noun support, the racial swearing was used to assist the compliment word, which was usually in the form of an adjective. On the other hand, as the anaphoric use of epithets, the racial swearing was used as an anaphoric pronoun, a pronoun that refers back to another noun in the utterance. It is anticipated that this study would lessen the misunderstanding that Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students may have when interacting with other English speakers on social media X.*

**Keywords:** racial swearing, compliments, X, pragmatic

### Abstrak

Hanya sedikit yang menyadari bahwa makian tidak selalu digunakan untuk mengekspresikan emosi negatif. Ia juga dapat dimanfaatkan untuk menyampaikan perasaan positif, seperti memuji. Penggunaan makian saat memuji adalah sebuah fenomena yang teridentifikasi di X, platform media sosial yang dulunya bernama Twitter. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk

mengkaji makna pragmatik dan fungsi pragmatik makian rasis dalam pujian pada media sosial X. Penelitian ini tergolong penelitian deskriptif kualitatif. Data penelitian ini berupa makian rasis dalam ujaran pujian pada X. Metode simak digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data. Sedangkan analisis data menggunakan metode padan dengan mengacu pada teori Hughes (2006), Kreidler (2002), Ljung (2011), dan Spears (2000). Hasil analisis data disajikan dengan menggunakan metode informal. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa makian rasis dalam pujian di media sosial X memiliki makna pragmatik 'pria'. Selain itu, ia memiliki fungsi pragmatik sebagai nomina pendukung dan penggunaan anaforis epitet. Sebagai nomina pendukung, makian rasis digunakan untuk membantu kata pujian, yang biasanya berbentuk adjektiva. Di sisi lain, sebagai penggunaan penggunaan anaforis epitet, makian rasis digunakan sebagai anaforis pronomina, yaitu pronomina yang merujuk kembali ke nomina lain dalam ujaran tersebut. Penelitian ini diharapkan dapat mengurangi kesalahpahaman yang dapat dialami oleh siswa EFL (*English as a Foreign Language* - 'Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing') Indonesia ketika berinteraksi dengan penutur bahasa Inggris lainnya di media sosial X.

**Kata Kunci:** makian rasis, pujian, X, pragmatik

## Introduction

In some situations, swearing (also synonymous with *cursing*, *insult*, *slur*, *profanity*, *swear words*, etc) is thought to be inappropriate. For instance, it wouldn't be deemed impolite to use the verb "piss"—which literally means "to urinate" or "urine"—in the sentence *there was piss all over that floor*. However, the same word would not be considered mannerly when used in the sentence, *why don't you just piss off!*

The aforementioned example demonstrates that profanity is not limited to expressing unpleasant emotions like rage. It can also be employed to convey positive feelings. When employed in the first sentence, the verb *piss* has a pleasant connotation. In contrast, when it's employed in the second sentence, it takes on a negative meaning. These samples also align with the findings of studies by Wang (2013) and Wang, et al. (2014), who discovered that swear words can be used to communicate love, gratitude, happiness, and solidarity in addition to being used to describe despair.

The same pattern can be observed on the social media platform X, where Indonesia is ranked fourth in the world for user counts (Annur, 2023). For instance, in the following tweet by @Txpshotta9\_ (x.com, 2024):



Picture 1. a tweet by @Txpshotta9

In Picture 1, @Txpshotta9 used the racial slur *nigga* to refer to himself. The word *nigga* is another way to say *nigger*, an extremely offensive word for a black person. However, as seen from the replies, none questioned or took offense for the use of the word. Based on the context, the word *nigga* in the utterance can also be substituted by 'guy' or 'man'. Hence, this word was not meant in a negative way despite it fit the criteria of swearing words by Ljung (2011).

According to Ljung (2011), these criteria are as follows: (1) it uses one or more taboo words in a nonliteral, metaphorical manner; (2) it is formulaic; and (3) it expresses the speaker's emotion. Moreover, cursing is classified according to its literal meaning. According to their literal meanings, there are ten themes of swear words: ancestors, animals, racial/ethnic, prostitution, disease, religious/supernatural, sex organ, family, death, and sexual activities (Hughes, 2006; Ljung, 2011).

In addition, there are four categories that define what swearing means. They are lexical meaning, grammatical meaning, linguistic meaning, and utterance meaning, according to Kreidler (2002). Literal meaning and lexical meaning are the same. On the other hand, the language's grammatical systems have an impact on grammatical meaning. What specific language units convey is referred to as their linguistic meaning (Kreidler, 2002). Additionally, according to Kreidler (2002), utterance meaning is the meaning that accompanies a person saying "such-and-such in a particular place."

On the other hand, Ljung (2011) explains that cursing serves three practical purposes: stand-alone, slot fillers, and replacive swearing. It serves as name-calling, oaths, curses, affirmation and contradiction, hostile suggestions, and ritual insults as a stand alone. However, when used as a slot filler, cursing serves as noun supports, modal adverbials, adjectives of hatred, anaphoric use of epithets, or adverbial/adjectival intensifiers. Within the last category, profanity serves as a substitute for common, non-taboo nouns and verbs, giving them new, literal meanings.

Even though this phenomena of language use seems intriguing, researchers have not yet discovered any studies on the use of racial swearing in compliments. Wang (2013) discusses the positive and negative feelings that can arise from using profanity. This is consistent with the study, which found that swearing can be a constructive form of expression. She does not include compliments in her research, though.

The studies by Drange et al. (2014) and Wang et al. (2014) also report the same phenomenon. Additionally, they do not include compliments in their analysis of swearing. Conversely, Indah and Rifana's (2018) study examines compliments; yet, it does not concentrate on profanity. It's thought that no previous research has been done on the topic of using racial swearing in compliments. Therefore, the researchers are eager to investigate the pragmatic meanings and functions of the racial profanity included in compliments on social media X. The findings of this study should help Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students communicate with other English speakers with more effectively.

## **Method**

This research is qualitative and descriptive in nature. Gall et al. (2003) state that descriptive research "involves describing characteristics of a particular sample of individuals or other phenomena." This research can be classified as descriptive since it examines the racial profanity that appears in compliments on social networking platform X as it is. The non-quantitative nature of the data makes it qualitative as well. The compliment speech acts written on X contained racist curses.

The tweets that were chosen for this study include compliments along with profanity related to race. To highlight the context of each tweet, the researchers also chose a subset of tweets that had replies. The tweets from public Twitter accounts in December 2018 were the ones that were captured. That is one of the most popular periods to tweet, thus that is why the tweets from that time were chosen (Statista, 2018).

The observational method was used to gather the data. This method was conducted by monitoring the use of language researched (Zaim, 2014; Sudaryanto, 2018). The observation was conducted without any interaction with the speakers (or the writers) of the tweets. In order to confirm that such tweets include racial profanities, the researchers also employed the theories of Hughes (2006) and Ljung (2011). Additionally, the theory triangulation method (Moleong, 2007) was also utilized to guarantee the validity of the data for this research.

The processes that the researchers went through in order to get the data are explained in detail below.

1. The researchers used X's Advanced Search function to look up racial swear words in the tweets. This feature enabled the researchers to restrict the tweets' duration to December 1st through December 31st, 2018.
2. The researchers separated the compliment-containing tweets from the other tweets that contained racial swearing only.
3. To confirm that the profanities in those tweets are, in fact, racial profanities, the researchers matched them to the theories put forward by Hughes (2006) and Ljung (2011).
4. The racial profanities in the compliments from the tweets were the data that the researcher collected.

Next, the researchers used Sudaryanto's (2018) identity method to analyze the data. The researchers consulted Spears (2000) and Kreidler's theory of meaning (2002) in order to determine the pragmatic meaning of the racial swearing discovered. In contrast, Ljung's (2011) swearing functions theory was consulted by the researcher in order to ascertain the pragmatic functions of the racial profanities discovered. The researchers completed the following steps to analyze the racial profanities' pragmatic meanings:

1. The researchers determined the context of the utterances by examining the responses, any media uploaded, and, if needed, by searching for details about the X user and the event they had tweeted.
2. The researchers looked for additional terms from the same linguistic forms that might be used in place of the curse word by employing the racial profanity's linguistic form and applying Kreidler's theory of meaning (2002).
3. The researchers deduced the pragmatic meanings of the racial swearing.

Finally, to clarify how the racial profanities serve a pragmatic purpose, the researcher took the following actions:

1. To ascertain the pragmatic purposes of racial swearing, the researcher consulted Ljung's (2011) theory of swearing functions.
2. The researcher gained the pragmatic functions of the racial swearing.

## Results and Discussions

Researchers found there were two racial swear words used in compliments. They were whitey and nigga. The research's findings also indicate that the racial swearing found in compliment speech acts on X have utterance meaning. It means that it can be comprehended by looking at the speaker's background information and context (Griffiths, 2006). Researchers have observed that the racial swear words used in compliments on X were meant as 'guy'. On the other hand, these racial swear words have pragmatic functions as anaphoric use of epithets and noun supports. D refers to "Datum", P refers to "Participant", and "U" refers to "Utterance".

(1) (D1)

- |    |    |  |
|----|----|--|
| P1 | U1 | In Pics: @priyankachopra and @nickjonas go all desi for a Puja held at Chopra's residence today. |
| P2 | U2 | this is literally,,,.What I want.....,   |
|    | U3 | This whitey is looking so handsome   |
|    | U4 | my heart is doing dis <3 <3 <3 desi boy smoochie   |
| P3 | U5 | Is this new girl?  |

(Source: Participants' tweets exchange, November 29, 2018, 2:23 PM)

Participant 1 is Mumbai Mirror, an online news source announcing the nuptials of Bollywood star Priyanka Chopra and American singer Nick Jonas. Participant 2 replied the tweet and expressed her desire for a wedding akin to that and mentioned how attractive Nick Jonas appeared. She referred to Nick Jonas by a pejorative phrase meant for a Caucasian person, whitey. Her friend, who seemed amazed by P2's response, said is this a new girl? Participant 2 then liked Participant 3's response.

P3's response indicates that he did not question the use of the racial insult whitey but rather that he only found his friend's response strange. Participant 2 was admiring Nick Jonas' appearance in the tweet above, therefore the profanity whitey was not intended to be offensive. Given that whitey came after demonstrative this in that tweet, it can be considered a noun. Interpreting the word whitey as 'guy' would make sense given the tweet's context. Whitey was therefore intended to mean 'guy' in this utterance.

Furthermore, whitey in P2's utterance was used to refer to the male singer Nick Jonas, which was shown anaphorically in P1 tweet. As mentioned previously, it is established that the word whitey meant 'guy' in D1. If the utterance is changed into this

guy is so handsome, it will convey the same meaning. Thus, the racial slur whitey in the tweets interaction above was used as an anaphoric use of epithet.

The next datum was nigga. As In D1, this racial slur was also used to replace the word 'guy'. However, unlike in D1, it pragmatically functions as a noun support.

(2) (D2)

- P1 U1 Not being cocky but I'm a handsome nigga.  
P2 U2 Looool we know!  
P3 U3 Very.  
U4 Anyone who thinks otherwise, doesn't have eyes  
tbh.

(Source: Participants' tweets exchange, December 4, 2018 1:06 PM)

The word nigga is a respelling of the word nigger (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2024). It literally means 'a black American; An African' according to Spears (2000). He also explained that this term is offensive and used as a derogatory term for blacks. In the tweet above, Participant 1 complimented himself by saying that he was "a handsome nigga." If the sentence not being cocky but I'm a handsome nigga is changed into not being cocky but I'm a handsome guy, it will have the same meaning. His two friends, Participant 2 and 3, whom did not question the use of the word cement the conclusion that this racial slur was not meant negatively. Thus, the word nigga in this context was meant as 'guy'.

On the hand, the word nigga was used after the adjective handsome. As in English it is common that noun comes after an adjective, it can be concluded that this swear word was used as a noun support. Therefore, from pragmatic perspective, it also functions as a noun support.

The use of nigga was also found in Datum 3. However, unlike in D2, it was used as an anaphoric use of epithets.

(3) (D3)

- P1 U1 If I can collect 100 Naira from 5000 people a month I  
will make half a million every month  
U2 What can I give you for you to give me your 100 Naira  
with ease?  
U3 500 persons from 10 states will produce my 5000  
people.  
P2 U4 smart nigga.  
U5 thats the dream o.



Make 1 Naira from every Nigerian on a monthly basis  
P1 U6 We over 200 Million, taking 1% for oneself is very satisfying

(Source: Participants' tweets exchange, December 5, 2018, 2:34 PM)

Participant 1 was humorously imagining a situation in which he could ask 5000 individuals for 100 Nigerian Naira and become wealthy. Participant 2 praised that notion by saying smart nigga. In response to P2's tweet, Participant 1 stated that it would be simple because there were more than 200 million people living in their home country.

Participant 1's reluctance to take offense at him being referred to as "nigga" indicates that U4 was interpreted as a compliment. It is a prohibited term demeaning people of African heritage, but in this exchange it has the same meaning as 'guy'. This conclusion also indicates that the word nigga was used as an anaphoric epithet.

## References

The study's findings show that (1) racial profanity used in praises on social media X can be interpreted as referring to a "guy," and (2) they function as anaphoric use of epithets and noun supports. It is assumed that the pragmatic functions of the swearing and their pragmatic meanings are related. It makes sense from a pragmatic standpoint that these racial terms serve as noun support and anaphoric use of epithets since the pragmatic meaning "guy" is a noun. The results and discussions further demonstrate that the utterances were, in fact, compliments, and that the racial swear words were either employed as anaphoric pronouns for the person or item being complimented, or as noun supports.

The results of this study should help Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students comprehend that English swearing may also be used in compliments, as there hasn't been any prior research on the topic of racial cursing in compliments. Since social media, particularly X, is the closest English-speaking setting for these students, the study's findings might help them interact more effectively with English speakers worldwide.

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