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## **Binary or diversity?**

### **A multimodal approach to Michael Jackson's music video "Black or White"**

This paper deals with the long video version (i.e., the one including the final morphing panther scene) of Michael Jackson's song "Black or White", which premiered in November 1991 (see Albergaria & Andraus 2021 for detail). I will adopt a multimodal approach, with a focus on both linguistic, aural, and visual aspects.

The investigation will start with a linguistic perspective, focusing on pronunciation and grammar. Rhoticity is probably the most important discriminating variable in accent studies (McMahon & Maguire 2013). And while Jackson is consistently non-rhotic in the song under investigation, thus conforming to older stereotypes of African American inner-city accents (Labov 1977: 13), he is variably (i.e., more) rhotic in public speeches, interviews, and even more private videos (cf. Werner 2021 for a recent model of classifying performed and other genres). Overall, however, we will see that phonetic and syntactic features (such as zero morphemes for 3SG Pres, e.g. *It don't matter if you're black or white*) in the performance of the lead singer Jackson and the (white) rapper(s) are not consistently or stereotypically 'white' or 'black' (cf. also Wolfram & Schilling 2016: ch.7 on African American English). As for the semantics of individual words, the use of the two central adjectives *black* and *white* as binary or graded antonyms will be investigated. Next, semantic and pragmatic aspects of longer text passages and their functions in the song will be elucidated.

In the second major part of the analysis, the linguistic results will be integrated into the greater picture, that is, performances, personalities, and family backgrounds of the musicians and actors/dancers, which of course necessitates the interpretation of critical video scenes. We will look at seemingly iconic and prima facie stereotypical scenes, which at a second glance are often revealed as ironic or staged (see Lott 1994 on the 'Indian' scene). The complete picture is thus more hybrid and diverse, displaying nuanced colours rather than just black and white. Examples will include 'white suburbia' vs. 'black inner city'. In this context, we will also look at modern music stereotypes and their protagonists, for instance, hard rock guitar players and rappers.

We will see that the component ethnicities of modern North American society initially figure in stereotyped, but at the same time parodied stylizations of their once native habitats: We see fighting 'Indians' on horseback, Caucasian cowboys and folklore Kremlin dancers, African hunters in a safari context and an Asian dancer in a polluted mega-city. Later in the video, however (after a Jacksonian dance and view from the Statue of Liberty), the contrasts between traditional indigenous Americans and more recent arrivals are dissolved in what was a technologically very advanced morphing scene in 1991: In it, young modern Americans seamlessly transition into one another. (Needless to say, this scene has served as the model of more recent anti-racism and anti-gender-discrimination videos, e.g., in football/soccer.)

In summary, I will argue that while playing with stereotypes, the linguistic hybridity underpins the visual and textual clues that the video provides for the deconstruction of colo(u)r and race binaries. Instead, both linguistic and visual traits reveal the fluidity of categories and stress diversity, and the many shades and colours between and beyond black and white.

## References

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