Black’s Meaning: 
An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Martin Heidegger’s Theory of Language

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Abstract:

"Language is the house of Being, in its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home” (Heidegger 203). These words from Martin Heidegger help to shape a broader intellectual discussion about the use of language. The philosophy of language allows us to examine how language has been used to shape, establish, and solidify cultures. As we use the tools offered us by philosophers who have studied language, we will be able to explore the language that accompanied the creation of racial categories and the role that it has played in American society. The origins of the words black and white will be examined and how, through racism, the words’ meanings have changed, thus enabling segregation within neighborhoods and schools. This analysis of the linguistic shaping of culture makes use of an ongoing interdisciplinary discussion of language application. If we, as Americans, change the connotations associated with white or black, could integration become a reality in our society?
Introduction

The sun shone beautifully from above through the clouds which floated with ease across the blue sky. Lashon, who had brought her son Billy to the suburban neighborhood park of Desoto, Texas, was puzzled by the presence of several white families there this summer day in 2001. She was not puzzled because there were white families present, but because when she would drop Billy off and pick him up from school each day, she did not see any white children and, of course, no white parents.

To put an end to this conundrum, Lashon asked a slender-framed white woman, who had to be no more than twenty-five years old, where her son who was the same height and size as Billy, went to school.

Lashon was slightly shocked when the woman replied, “He attends the charter school in Red Oak.”

After leaving the park that evening, Lashon began to research the Red Oak charter school the woman mentioned. It was located just 10 miles south. She was surprised to find that 99% of the children who attended this charter school in the neighboring city were white.

As she thought aloud, rather sad in tone, “I have a master’s degree in education. I earn nearly $100,000 a year and I keep my home in mint condition. My son is well-kempt and orderly. Why, over the past ten years, have I continued to see the white families move away while only black families move in?” She continued, “What will this neighborhood look like in the next ten years? What will the schools be like? Will I need to move again?”

Lashon’s observations and questions bring us to acknowledge that segregation remains in our communities and schools despite the efforts of legislators. We are left questioning where this problem truly began and if a solution will ever present itself.
“Language is the house of Being, in its home man dwells,” Heidegger claims; “Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home” (22). If we analyze the feelings from whites towards those of the black race within the United States with the tool that has been lent to us by Martin Heidegger in his profound theory of the power of language, perhaps we could understand the implications of the word black juxtaposed with the word white. We would be able to determine how each transformed from a state of neutrality into race (character and ability) defining agents; then we will not be stunned when we learn that the associated meanings of the word black and the word white in relation to the construction of race serves as the root cause of segregation in our schools. A re-definition of the word black beginning within the African-American communities would be a viable and sustainable remedy for the unrelenting hold of segregation in our communities.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger grappled with the idea of the power and misappropriation of language. In his essay, “The Way to Language,” Heidegger argues language “is the keeper of being present, in that its coming to light remains entrusted to the appropriating show of Saying. Language is the house of Being because language, as Saying, is the mode of Appropriation” (135). Heidegger contends that the words we speak are not simply intangibles but have the power to create environments. Those environments can be filled with peace, joy, and love in the home, office, workplace, city and/or country. Conversely, these words can also produce an environment that is infused with chaos, strife, and fear. How are mere words able to foster an atmosphere? Words, as Heidegger suggests that as language has an inherent “danger” in it because “language itself rests on the metaphysical distinction between the sensuous and the suprasensuous” (15). This dual power of language allows it to express that which is tangible and intangible (indefinable by logic) that finds language underestimated. Befitting this
underestimation of the power of the appropriation of words introduces the old phrase: “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.”

According to Heidegger, to avoid possible damage that frequently occurs through devaluing the “Saying” of words in language, one should unfailingly “examine whether each word in each case is given its full—most often hidden—weight” (31).

To convey his theory of the power of language and the spoken word, Heidegger expresses his appreciation for not only the strength of “interpretation but, even before it, the bearing and message of tidings” (63) Heidegger looks to the poem “Words” by Stefan George, which was published in 1919, to extrapolate the authority of words in relation to being:

Wonder or dream from distant land  
I carried to my country’s strand

And waited till the twilight norn  
Had found the name within her bourn—

Then I could grasp it close and strong  
It blooms and shines now the front along…

Once I returned from happy sail,  
I had a prize so rich and frail,

She sought for long and tidings told:  
“No like of this these depths enfold.”

And straight it vanished from my hand,  
The treasure never graced my land…

So I renounced and sadly see:  
Where words break off no thing may be.  
(Stefan George, qtd. in Heidegger 63)

For our exploration of Heidegger’s thoughts we will look to the last line of the final stanza. Heidegger infers that the “breaking off” of words leaves an absence of being. He asserts that without an assignment of name or an appropriation of word, whatever the thing may be, it cannot exist because there are no words attached to it (Heidegger 61).
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Equally, as a disassociation of word leaves a thing without being, an association or appropriation of a word gives a thing being. Heidegger writes, “The word itself is the giver. What does it give? To go by the poetic experience and most ancient tradition and thinking, the word gives being. Our thinking then would have to seek the word…” (88).

Here we find that the words associated with an idea assign, in a sense, the supposed purpose of that now being.

Heidegger contends that language that is spoken can be the “flower of the mouth” (99). Language can be a life giving source. It can be that which gives strength in the darkest hours if words are carefully weighed before assigned.

With Heidegger’s thought provoking theory on language as a backdrop, we will briefly examine the etymology of the words “black” and “white” and the impact the use of these words have had on race relations within the U.S.

The etymology of the word black is traced back to the Latin word flagrare which means “to blaze, glow, or burn,” according to Harper Douglas’ Etymology Dictionary. This dictionary also provides that *bhel- is a base in Old English for the word black, which is also used as the base for the word bleach. The Old English etymology includes blac, which was defined as “bright, shining, glittering, and pale.” The word black was not attested as synonymous with sinister, evil or criminal (as it is widely used today) until the 1540’s. Interestingly enough, black was not associated with skin color until the late 1620’s (Harper “black”).

Worth noting, the etymology of the word white is basically synonymous with the word black. Harper’s Etymology Dictionary gives that Old Church Slavonic’s original meanings for white were—sviteti- “to shine,” svaintyt- “to brighten,” and kwindos- “bright”—the original
meanings of both (*black* and *white*) were neutral in relation to color. Research also found that white was not associated with skin color until the 1600s (Harper “white”).

The word associations of *subpar* with “*black*” and *superior* with “*white*” did not cease with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865 or the Federal ruling of Brown vs. The Board of Education in 1954 which desegregated public schools. In fact, the evidence of the evolution of “black” is found in thesauruses and dictionaries for scholarly work which are readily available online, in bookstores, and in libraries. The “Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary” (1913) offers these words as one of its definitions for “black:” “Expressing menace, or discontent; threatening; sullen; foreboding; as, to regard one with black looks & hand.” In addition, Webster gives the following as a sentence example: “Black act, the English statute 9 George I, which makes it a felony to appear armed in any park or warren, etc., or to hunt or steal deer, etc., with the face blackened or disguised.” This language was used publicly in 1913 during what can be viewed as one of the worse times of race relations in the U.S.

A more recent definition found on Dictionary.com, defines “black” as “without any moral quality or goodness; evil; wicked,” and a sentence example that is given for the word “black” is: “His black heart has concocted yet another black deed” (Dictionary.com “black”).

Webster’s offers this entry as one of its definitions for the word “white:” “Regarded with especial favor; favorite; darling.” Following this definition are sentence examples: “Come forth, my white spouse,” and “I am his white boy, and will not be gullet” (Webster “white”). Dictionary.com submits “rare, morally unblemished, decent, honorable, or dependable,” as a definition for “white” and also offers this sentence: “That's very white of you” (Dictionary.com 2010).
The effect of the words associated with “white” and “black,” as it relates to race, affect the way our children view not only themselves but also other children of the same and varying ethnicities. Soledad O’Brien, reporter for CNN News, disclosed that new tests have been conducted to find out if race is still a factor among the children of this generation. A test was conducted by child psychologist Margaret Beale Spencer on 133 children. The children were shown a board with drawings of young girls who were identical, except for the color of their skin; the children were asked “Which girl is smarter?” and the majority of the children chose the white girl. The children were also asked “Which girl is mean?” and one child responded by saying, “the light one is good because she looks like me.” She continued, “This one,” pointing at the dark doll drawing, “she is mean because she is dark.” According to O’Brian, the study showed that both the black and white children had majority color preference for the white doll drawing. This study with the young children allows us to readily see the negative effects of the word associations that are inherent in this construction of race.

High school students in the segregated areas feel the sting of the problem of segregation that language has brought to our young people. Jonathan Kozol, author of “Still Separate, Still Unequal,” spoke with a student who was in a public school in Harlem, New York. She felt that her schooling situation was one of being “hidden,” she elaborated, “It’s as if you have been put in a garage where, if they don’t have room for something but aren’t sure if they should throw it out, they put it there where they don’t need to think of it again” (para. 12). A student feeling as if she has been thrown away because of the disparities inherent in segregation should not be.

Kozol elaborates on the failed efforts to integrate schools in upper middle-class Manhattan. Martin Luther King Jr. High school was opened in an effort to bring “white, black, and Hispanic students in a thriving neighborhood that held one of the city’s cultural gems” (para.
9). The white parents could not trust that their children would not be corrupted by what has been understood as “evil,” groups of blacks, so these parents bypassed the new school in their neighborhood while the black children were bussed in to this school. Kozol states that Martin Luther King Jr. High School “stands today as one of the nation’s most visible and problematic symbols of an expectation rapidly receding and a legacy substantially betrayed” (para. 9).

This example, provided by Kozol, gives credence to the power of the words that have instilled fear in the hearts of the parents of the “white” children and the children themselves as proven through the testing conducted by Dr. Spencer. If not for the misuse of the words “black” and “white,” there would not be the inhibitions that accompany the notion of diverse schooling. The “legacy” of blacks who were civil rights champions, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, is “betrayed” as Kozol states.

Kozol notes that they were betrayed by a hope in the overturning of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Plessey v. Ferguson (1896) with Brown v. Board of Education (1954). Although, “separate but equal” was over legally, the language which drives segregation still demands separation. There will never be a need for the dominant society to provide the best education to those who are seen as “lesser” and “subpar.”

In 2002, The Choice Plan was introduced in the Charlotte, North Carolina Public School District. This plan gave parents the option of bussing their children to the public school (as they had been doing) or allowing parents to transfer their children to schools in wealthier suburban areas. This plan was implemented by law makers because the school was failing academically.

In his broadcast, Jonathan Pitts (n. pag.) notes a common trend: “Wealthier families moved their kids to well performing schools and poorer families, mostly black and Latino, stayed where they were.” This association again serves as evidence of the power of the language
associated with race. Wealth and success are associated with “white” and poverty and failure are associated with “black.” Any family, of any race—if given the option—will choose the route of success for their children that would not include them being subjected to, supporting, or advocating a quality education for those which are determined “criminals.”

Douglass Massey and Nancy Denton, authors of “American Apartheid,” found through their research that the majority of whites are unwilling to live in a neighborhood that consisted of more than one or two black families; their research found that “once a neighborhood reached about one-third black, the limits of racial tolerance were reached for the majority of whites: 73% would be unwilling to enter, 57% would feel uncomfortable, and 41% would try to leave” (93).

“Negative stereotypes remain firmly entrenched in white psyches,” argue Massey and Denton (95). In 1990, Tom Smith of the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center conducted a survey to compare opinions of blacks and others in regards to their personal traits. Massey and Denton recorded what Tom Smith’s findings were: “he found that 62% of nonblack respondents thought that blacks were lazier than other groups, 56% felt they were more prone to violence, 53% saw them as less intelligent, and 78% thought they were less self-supporting and more likely to live off welfare” (95).

As a result of these feelings about blacks, whites did leave areas that would offer homes in their neighborhoods to black families. These areas were left depopulated and without the financial resources that were once available.

Banks would no longer invest in the housing market in these “white” abandoned areas and the property values plumbeted. Massey and Denton (122) found that the schools which are funded through the collection of property taxes began to receive less funding resulting in less funding for books, staff, and participation in the arts. The image associated with blackness
caused the inequality in the schools. The words “white” and “black” are not equal anymore and, as a result, our schools in America receive funding and treatment in proportion with the wording established by the construction of race.

Policy makers, civil rights activists, and preachers have argued for equality since the time of slavery. All of the efforts to bring equality in the schools of the U.S. would be celebrated and acknowledged as commendable; circumstances are apparent, however, that these efforts are ineffective. They are ineffective because language houses what we feel, and our feelings are tied to our responses and reactions, and the language associated with the constructed institution of race is problematic and has been since its inception. The construct was founded on questionable ground and therefore, is questionable in its continuance.

However Heidegger, through his theory of language, enabled us to identify how the misappropriation and misuse of words established division between people of African ancestry and those of European ancestry within the U.S. His theory also offers a definitive answer for integration within communities and thus schools.

As Heidegger reviewed the poetry of Stefan George to explore the power of words, we will review one of the works of African-American poet Audre Lorde, entitled “Coal”, which was first published in 1976, to further establish the creative power of words and the effectiveness they can have in this effort for true desegregation.

Is the total black, being spoken
   From the earth's inside.
   There are many kinds of open.
   How a diamond comes into a knot of flame
   How a sound comes into a word, coloured
   By who pays what for speaking.

   Some words are open
   Like a diamond on glass windows
   Singing out within the crash of passing sun
Then there are words like stapled wagers
In a perforated book—buy and sign and tear apart—
And come whatever wills all chances
The stub remains
An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.
Some words live in my throat
Breeding like adders. Others know sun
Seeking like gypsies over my tongue
To explode through my lips
Like young sparrows bursting from shell.
Some words
Bedevil me.

Love is a word another kind of open—
As a diamond comes into a knot of flame
I am black because I come from the earth's inside
Take my word for jewel in your open light.
(Audre Lorde in Keating 156)

This poem by Audre Lorde serves as representation of her “transformational” ability through her writing. Lorde “begins constructing the world she envisions” by the words she decidedly uses according to Texas Women’s University professor Dr. Ann Louise Keating (156).

The poem opens in the first stanza with “I is the total black.” From the outset, Lorde intriguingly takes total possession of her blackness despite the debilitating labeling ascribed with black.

She acknowledges the creative power of the spoken word “being spoken from the earth’s inside.” With Lorde’s recognition of the Earth’s voice, we hear echoes of Heidegger in his essay “The Nature of Language.” He states, “the landscape, and that means the earth speaks in them, differently each time. But the mouth is not merely a kind of organ of the body understood as an organism—body and mouth are part of the earth’s flow and growth in which we mortals flourish, and from which we receive the soundness of our roots” (Heidegger 106).
For Lorde and Heidegger, there is an appreciation for our connection to the creative ability of the earth and our direct ability to speak creatively as the Earth does.

Lorde continues with acceptance that there are many ways things are created. She calls this creative ability “a kind of open.” Before moving forward, Lorde alerts us to a transformation that can and will be occurring, “How a diamond comes into a knot of flame.” Not only are we reminded of the aforementioned etymological renderings of the word black “to blaze, to glow, to burn,” but we also again hear Heidegger referencing the transformative power of the earth with the words, “in language the earth blossoms toward the bloom of the sky.”

Heidegger offers a definition of “saying:” “to say means to show, to make appear, the lighting-concealing-releasing offer of world” (107). Heidegger’s definition of saying serves as further proof of the creative power of words. According to Heidegger, words that are spoken bring light or they conceal matters or they release that which has been bound.

Lorde ponders about “how a sound comes into a word;” this same question, Heidegger answers with the description of a “simple phenomena” (101).

This “simple phenomena” is carried on by those who have “coloured” or diverse motives in the words that they choose to speak. Through this poem, Lorde highlights that there are words that cut with the force of “diamonds” and other words that “tear apart” after which only the “stub remains.” Lorde continues to express that there continue to be words that are “ragged” that are sure to be injurious along with the venomous words that live in the “throat” waiting to come out to strike back out of revenge.

But the alternative to the dilemma of segregation is found in this transformative power called “love,” a “word” that is “another kind of open.”
This “love” or this “word” “love” is what can be the catalyst to change. This type of change starts when the individual African-American man or woman who has owned all the negative appropriations of the word black has an opportunity through the knowledge we have gained to change his or her mindset, through Martin Heidegger’s theory on language, and the insight we have been privy to through the work of Audre Lorde.

What does this transformation mean? What does it entail? This transformation means reassigning love to black and beauty to black. This transformation entails realizing that negative synonyms associated with black have been internalized and that they must be brought up and exposed for what they are: a construction of misinformed people of the seventeenth century.

The transformation of the individual African-American, if viewed by the transformed as an opportunity for unity, will affect those within his or her community that were once abandoned by whites in fear of segregation.

This observance of a possibility for transformation is not a pipe-dream but a realization that we cannot change people. We can own our individual ability to transform and transcend ineffective ways of living and thinking.

This change is also recognition of our influential natures as human beings. With that acknowledgment, I propose that progress starts with one person within an impoverished black community who would begin to accept a different meaning for the word black. Not only an acceptance but a complete abandonment of the former construct can cause a neighborhood to identify with the power of words, thus encouraging a change in self-worth. This change in self-worth can lead to new employment opportunities within the community that has been abandoned.

Employment opportunities within this community can lead to more income being generated, and thus, more finances available for the schools within this neighborhood.
When the neighborhood is changed (changed because one man or woman decided to internally change the definition of black from nefarious, ugly, dirty and low to successful, beautiful, smart, wealthy and lovely) then those who had a misunderstanding of what black means will not fear the schools which are predominately black in this community, for they will be drawn to that which has been transformed from “coal” to “diamond.”
Works Cited


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