



## Review Article

# Research on Racial Language Discrimination of Black Group and Their Identity Construction ——Take the Film *Green Book* as an Example

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**Abstract:** Black racial language discrimination experienced a long period of existence in American history. It seems that the black group always gives people the impression that their social, political and cultural status is very low. This seems to be imposed by white Americans on the black group, and the black group can only passively accept this identity setting. However, it should be pointed out that in many human rights movements, black people have tried to change this passive situation and construct their positive social identity, especially the recent anti-racial discrimination activities in the United States due to the death of a black man, George Floyd, caused by white policeman violence. Taking *Green Book*, the best film of the 2018 Oscar, as an example, this article links racial discrimination with identity construction, and analyzes how the hero, Dr. Shirley, actively constructs his identity as one of black group from the perspectives of equal right and civic right in his conversation with the southern white Americans.

**Keywords:** racial language discrimination; black group; identity construction; *Green Book*.

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## INTRODUCTION

Xijie Wang [1] pointed out that language discrimination is the malignant development of language affection, the manifestation of language ignorance, the reflection of politics, economics, cultures; racial differences, contradictions, opposition and imbalance, and the outlet for politics, economics, social class and racial discrimination. As a long-term enslaved group in American history, black people have been discriminated against by white Americans in language, politics, economics and social status for a long time. As for the study of black language discrimination, scholars pay more attention to its features, forms and root causes, while few scholars analyze black language discrimination from the perspective of identity construction. The purpose of identity construction is to help individuals find a sense of social and national belonging and truly integrate themselves into the society and the country. Taking the film *Green Book* as an example, the purpose of this article is to study

black racial language discrimination from the perspective of identity construction theory, analyzes the conversation between Dr. Shirley and white Americans and indicates that the black group does not passively accept the low racial identity set by others (here mainly refers to white Americans), but changes this stereotype, thus positively constructs their identity as citizens of America.

## RACIAL LANGUAGE DISCRIMINATION AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THEORY RACIAL LANGUAGE DISCRIMINATION

The root of racial language discrimination lies in racial discrimination. Racial discrimination in the United States has a long history, and most of its effects are hidden and delayed. Therefore, most racial discrimination and prejudice incidents are ignored in the short term, but they still have negative effects in a long period of time [2]. Hence, the human rights movement of the black group also hard and protracted struggle. And this kind of racial

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Discrimination is full of all aspect of life, culture, politics and so on. Although the black group has been integrated themselves into the 'melting pot' of the United States for quite a long time, they are still labeled ethically, such as 'lower race' and 'the poor', or they are always introduced with the prefix 'black' to remind their racial differences. It should be noted that such statements should and must become history to show national justice [3]. Black racial language discrimination is mainly manifested in the white Americans' prejudice against black group, and the appellation change of black group mainly experienced 'African', 'colored', 'negro', 'black', 'Afro-American', or 'African American' [4]. The above different appellation of black group is strong manifestation of racial discrimination. It can be seen that racial discrimination against black people in the United States directly reflects the fact that black group is inferior race, and for a long time, the black group cannot change this distorted statement. It is worth noting that from the perspective of intercultural communication, power theory has also become the 'accomplice' of racial discrimination, that is, power requires some kind of asymmetric relationship between entities: one has more of something that is important, e.g. status, money, influence, etc., than the other of others.[5]. In the United States, the language of black people in a weak position will naturally be branded with racial discrimination along with their status and power.

### Identity Construction Theory

Identity is the understanding of the interaction between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical settings that are made up of this subtle subjectivity, and this is about whom we are [6]. Identity reflects a person's social existence, and each individual plays a variety of roles in social life, for example, a woman, she can be a daughter, wife, mother, company employee, etc. In contemporary times, professional identity has become more and more important. People have established the concept of group through professional identity, which has become the most important aspect of shaping personal social identity [7]. Moreover, different social roles will also determine the way this identity speaks. The identity that a person chooses intentionally or unintentionally when he or she sends out or understands specific words or even the whole discourse is mainly constructed by utterances [8]. Social construction theorists have discussed the relationship between language, power and identity, and emphasized the importance of criticism and self-identity consciousness. Besides, the linguists also analyzed the role of discourse in the construction of identity in a specific context [9]. Language reflects power, and language and power are the key elements of identity construction. Therefore, from

the description and analysis of language, It can be clear seen that the dynamic construction process of power and identity and the importance of self-identity construction consciousness. Bhabha's [10] theory of hybrid also points out that the formation of identity cannot be separated from the participation of power; social identity exists in the power relationship, and the exercise of power reflects social identity. In addition, identity is directly related to the relocation of the central structure and marginal components, mainstream and tributaries of social culture, and the reallocation of majority and minority, group and individual power, which also has an increasingly significant impact on the policy thinking and policy-making process of various countries [11]. In summary, it can be clearly seen that language is closely related to the social identity of the speaker and its power and status.

Along with the language racial discrimination of the black group, people always have this kind of cognition: black people are related to all negative things, such as poverty, disease, low social status, etc. Even the English language they speak is deeply branded as ethnic discrimination. But in essence, the English language black people speak is only a variant of Standard English, so its status is the same as the status of Standard English. However, due to the long-term existence of slave trade, it seems that the status of black people and their language at the bottom of society has become an indisputable fact. However, it should be pointed out that the non-standard features of the English language black people speak in the phonetic, grammatical and lexical aspects are not caused by the cognitive ability of black people, but are closely related to their special experiences [12]. In history, since the slave emancipation proclamation, black people have been fighting human rights constantly to gain equal right with white Americans in all aspects. At first, they have achieved little effect and even racial discrimination has become increasingly fierce in the United States. For more than a century, the social status of black people has changed obviously, especially after Obama became the first black president of the United States. The identity of black group has been recognized by the society, but it is also closely related to the human rights struggle and active construction of their identity.

### The Selection of Corpus

The corpus selected in this article comes from the lines of the film *Green Book*. The lines document cannot be downloaded, therefore, the article posts the link (<http://www.docin.com/touch/detail.do?id=2214621550>) [13] for readers to read and refer to.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK GROUP IN THE FILM *GREEN BOOK* BACKGROUND INTRODUCTION TO THE FILM *GREEN BOOK***

The film *Green Book* is the best Oscar Movie in 2018, which is adapted from the real life of the dead American classical and jazz pianist and composer Dr. Donald Shirley. The background was set in 1962, when Dr. Donald Shirley gave a concert tour in the United States, some of which are needed to be explored in the Deep South (the region with particularly serious racial discrimination). So he hired a white Italian gangster named Tony Vallelonga as his driver and bodyguard. It is such a white man who is not so 'white' and a black man who is not so 'black', who sublimated the friendship beyond race on the journey.

In the film *Green Book*, although Dr. Shirley has received a good education since childhood and became an admirable multi-degree genius, people only appreciate his ability and education background, and there is still deep discrimination against his black nature. So there are many straightforward discriminatory words against black people, such as 'jungle bunnies', 'moolie', and 'Negro', and soon on, used on Dr. Shirley. This article focuses more on the discrimination that Dr. Shirley encountered during the tour, and how he constructs his identity as a black person in the process of conversation with others, especially the white Americans. However, it should be pointed out that in the process of conversation, although the white people did not use insulting words with obvious racial discrimination when facing Dr. Shirley, racial discrimination is full of the language they speak, such as the tone, attitude, etc. So the article mainly analyzes the identity construction of Dr. Shirley in the process of conversation with the white Americans from the two aspects of equal right and civic right.

### **Equal Right and Identity Construction**

In the film *Green Book*, Dr. Shirley has been making efforts for the black people's equal right, and he actively constructs the same social status as the white people. There are two obvious conversations in the film to show how Dr. Shirley constructs the identity with his equal right.

#### **Example-1:**

Host: Excuse me, Don. Lovely work in there.  
Dr. Shirley: Well, thank you!  
Host: Are you looking for the commode? Here, let me help you. Right out, there' fore that pine.  
Dr. Shirley: I'd prefer not to use that.  
Host: Well, don't be silly, Don. It looks a lot worse from the outside.

Dr. Shirley: And I'd suppose you'd know from experience.

Host: What? Never had any complains.

Dr. Shirley: Well, I could return to my hotel and use the facilities there. But ... that would take at least a half an hour.

Host: We don't mind waiting.

The conversation took place in Dr. Shirley's performance intermission. When he was looking for the bathroom, he met the host who invited him to have the performance. The dialogue shows that the host would rather delay everyone for at least half an hour than let Dr. Shirley use the bathroom in his house. Instead of following the host's advice to go to a poor toilet outside the house, Dr. Shirley insisted on driving back to the hotel and using facilities there. The host said: "what? Never had any complains", reflects his surprise and disgust at Shirley's refusal to use the toilet outside. In addition, "We don't mind waiting." indicates the host's patronizing tone, implying that he would rather waste everyone's time than let Dr. Shirley use the bathroom in the house. The different settings of washrooms for white and black people itself have broken the equal right of all people. For the naked discrimination and disdain of white American, Dr. Shirley did not yield, and he fought back with grace. By saying that, he actively constructed the positive social identity of black people and fought for social equality for black group.

#### **Example-2:**

Waiter: Good evening. Can I help you?

Dr. Shirley: I understand but...

Tony: What's going on?

Dr. Shirley: This gentleman says I'm not permitted here.

Tony: No. You don't understand. He's playing tonight, he's the main event.

Waiter : I'm sorry. It's the policy of the restaurant.

Manager: Everything all right?

Tony: No, It's not all right. This guy is saying Dr. Shirley can't eat here.

Manager: Well, I apologize, but these are... longstanding traditional Club rules. I'm sure you understand.

Dr. Shirley: No, I do not understand.

Manager: I'm sorry.

Tony: Wait a minute, are you telling me the bozos in his band and these people that come here to see him play, they can eat here, but the star of the show, the talking spot of honor, he can't.

Manager: I'm afraid not.

Tony: Well, he's gotta eat, I mean he's gotta have dinner.

Manager: I tell you what. Why don't we bring something to his dressing room, huh?

Dr. Shirley: No, I'm not eating in that storage room.

Manager: Oaky...if you'd prefer, there's a very popular establishment right down the road, the Orange Bird, they'd be happy to feed you.

Tony: Doc., come here. One second just. C'mon, maybe that place is better anyway. The dinner rolls here are like rocks. Let's just go over...just go and back. It's the last show, bottom of the nine. Let's just get it over with and we can go home and get away from these pricks.

Manager: Ah, there you go, the fish is wonderful tonight.

Dr. Shirley: Either I eat in this room, or I'm not performing tonight.

This conversation took place in the dining room. When Dr. Shirley came to have dinner with his driver and playing partners, he was stopped outside the hall by the waiter. Black people were not allowed to eat there, but Dr. Shirley, who defended his equal right, insisted on eating there. Finally, it couldn't be solved. Dr. Shirley and his driver, Tony, decided to leave the restaurant together and gave up playing. From the dialogue between the waiter and the manager, "It's the policy of the restaurant." indicates that the black people are not allowed to eat there. Besides, the manager also suggested that Dr. Shirley eat in the dressing room. The dialogue among the waiter, the manager and Dr. Shirley shows that both the waiter and manager feel nothing wrong about their discriminating words against black people, even though he is Dr. Shirley. But Dr. Shirley said: "no, I'm not eating in that storage room; either I eat in this room." It indicates that Dr. Shirley does not make any concession to his equal right, because his childhood education makes him more determined to fight for the right of the black group he belongs to. And he once said that talent is not enough, and it takes a lot of courage to change people's ideas. So he did not follow white Americans' advice like other black people, instead, he fought for the right to say no to unfair behavior as a member of the black group. Here, he actively constructed the identity with the same equal right as white Americans have. Even if what he did was not successful, it changed more or less the stereotype of white Americans towards the black group, which affected the white Americans' rethinking of the significance of equality for all, human rights and freedom advocated by the white people.

### **Civic Right and Identity Construction**

In the film *Green Book*, when Dr. Shirley's legal right as an American citizen is violated, his conversation with the police officers shows that he is neither humble nor pushy, which well constructs

his identity as a member of the black group who can fight for the legal civic right in the United States. This article also selects a dialogue from the lines of the film for analysis.

### **Example-3:**

Dr. Shirley: Excuse me, sirs. I understand why my associate is being held, but what exactly am I being charged with? You seem like reasonable men. Perhaps you could let me out so that we could discuss the situation further?

Officer A: Just put the apple butter away, boy. You are not going nowhere no time soon.

Dr. Shirley: You can't hold me without cause!

Officer A: Well, I got cause. Cause you let the sun set on your black ass!

Dr. Shirley: I want to speak to my lawyer, I want my call! This is a flagrant violation of my fights!

Officer B: You know... He does have...rights.

Officer C: Give the Negro his goddamn phone call. You happy?

Officer A: You know a lawyer? Call him.

The conversation took place at the police station when Dr. Shirley's driver beat up a police officer who insulted them. So the officer put the driver and Dr. Shirley into the police station together. Dr. Shirley thought that he had done nothing wrong, but he was put into prison for no reason. Therefore, he negotiated with the police officers to let him out and talk the driver's beating incident over with the police officers. However, he was insulted and refused by one of the beaten officers. Dr. Shirley was angry and wanted to exercise his right as an American citizen and call his lawyer. After Dr. Shirley's repeated requests, they agreed to let him call his lawyer, but these policemen said: "Just put the apple butter away, boy. And cause you let the sun set on your black ass.", which is full of contempt and discrimination. At the police station, Dr. Shirley is calm and cool-headed. He said: "You can't hold me without cause; I want to speak to my lawyer, I want my call! This is a flagrant violation of my fights!" Instead of giving in law enforcement officer who illegally detained him, he repeatedly insisted on exercising his legitimate rights as a citizen of the United States. In his dialogue with the police officers, Dr. Shirley always kept rational, actively defended his civil right and never gave in the white American policemen. In addition, the police officer said: "Give the Negro his goddamn phone call; You know a lawyer? Call him." Despite the police officer still used the word 'Negro' to call Dr. Shirley, the compromise of the police officer to Dr. Shirley's request for telephone calls also reflects that Dr. Shirley has won in the struggle to strive for his civic right.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that even if the white Americans' language discrimination is not too straightforward, the tone like the white police yelling at Dr. Shirley, the attitude of the male host who asks Dr. Shirley to play at home are full of naked discrimination and disdain. Although Dr. Shirley is black, he is full of good breeding. He politely refuses the master's discriminatory suggestions, and he rationally requests to call his lawyer during the unlawful stay and residence. Even facing the discrimination from white Americans, his appropriate language and behavior, such as politely and rationally proposing his own civic right, undoubtedly constructed a positive social identity for the black group. It also allowed the black group to gain self-esteem and positive recognition from others, especially southern white people.

## CONCLUSION

This article mainly analyzes how Dr. Shirley, as one of the black group, actively constructs his identity by talking with white Americans during his tour in the south of United States. Dr. Shirley changes the stereotype of white people, and he is able to maintain self-esteem of his group, and actively strive for his own equal right and civic right in communication with white Americans. In the struggle of the construction of social identity, Dr. Shirley constantly constructs positive social identity for the black group. The problem of black racial language discrimination in the United States today is not as sharp as in the last century, and the discriminatory language almost no longer exists in daily communication, but the films of racial discrimination still sound the alarm for racial discrimination in the United States from time to time.

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