

English B Extended Essay

Topic: Analysis on the film “*Hidden Figures*” revealing cultural attitudes towards Black women through language and manners.

Research Question: How does the film, “*Hidden Figures*”, reveal the cultural attitudes towards Black women through language and manners in the 1960s in an American workplace?

Category 2b: Culture and Society

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A. Introduction

This essay explores how the film *“Hidden Figures”*, directed by Theodore Melfi and released in 2016, uses language to convey the cultural attitudes toward Black women in an American workplace in the 1960s. The film takes place in the 1960s, during the enforcement of Jim Crow Laws and the Civil Rights Movement. The film provides a modern interpretation of the 1960s, as it was shot in a modern period. It is based on true events in which the story of three African American women, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson are presented. They worked at NASA, faced gender and racial based discrimination, and were segregated from job positions, working, promotions, and education in the 1960s. Three main characters of the film are based on real people, with their names still listed on the NASA website with their biographies because of their contributions to the space race taking place during that time. (NASA, 2025)

Attitudes towards race and gender can be reflected by the use of language. The language used in the film *“Hidden Figures”* acts as a mirror of societal attitudes of the era. Jim Crow Laws for segregation were taking place, and the film represents the discrimination that occurred after. Specifically, the film’s setting uses a workplace, NASA, highlighting the impacts on workplaces. In order to reach a better insight of the historical context of the era, articles, online sources and books regarding Jim Crow Laws and Civil Rights Movements will also be consulted.

Representing the cultural beliefs, attitudes and perspectives towards Black women in the 1960s of America, the historical background is important. It highlights how the film reflects what happened in the 1960s, and provides a clearer understanding of the film, the

discrimination experienced by Black women in that time period, and analyzes how it conveys the cultural attitudes towards race and gender. The aim of this essay is to examine how the tool of language was used in the film, and how it reflected the cultures' attitudes towards Black women, and the societal norms regarding their place in workplaces.

For this examination, analysis will take place through primary and secondary sources. Primary sources will include the film itself, through close analysis of language in the dialogue, tone of the characters, and their body language by film scripts or transcripts of selected scenes. The segregated workplace of the 1960s formed how Black women were treated and perceived, which is also evident from the dialogue and interactions found in the film. Secondary sources stated in the works cited regarding gender, race, and workplace discourse in 1960s America will be examined. Through examining, a clearer understanding of the topic will be provided with the background information.

Investigation will be done for this essay on the use of language and communication for reflecting and challenging discrimination. The methodology for this investigation will contain pragmatic study of language use, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistics. Therefore, this essay will investigate the research question of "How does the film, *"Hidden Figures"*, reveal the cultural attitudes towards Black women through language and manners in the 1960s in an American workplace?"

B. Specific Linguistic Choices

In this section, the transcript and scenes of the film “*Hidden Figures*” will be analyzed. Using the analysis, how the specific linguistic features such as register and politeness strategies, speech acts, lexical choices, tone and code-switching reflect and reinforce discrimination and cultural attitudes will be examined.

Societal norms are usually known to shape individuals’ perspectives and attitudes towards others. If the whole society believes in an idea, it would be harder to retract people from those ideas even if they do not believe that way. In the film “*Hidden Figures*”, the timeline is set in the 1960s, which is when Jim Crow laws were also taking place, and colored people had to face enormous amounts of discrimination. The significance of this context lies in the influence of Jim Crow laws creating a physical separation with the specific linguistic choices that reinforce social hierarchies and discrimination. The film reflects these through specific speech patterns, dialogue, labels and silence.

B. 1. Register & Politeness

Hierarchy is defined as a system in which people or things are arranged according to their importance by the Cambridge Dictionary. (Cambridge University Press, n.d.) Hierarchy can be observed in various parts of a society, particularly in workplaces in which people are ranked based on their authority. This ranking creates a hierarchical structure in the workplace, which is reflected by language. In the film “*Hidden Figures*”, language of hierarchy is spotted on multiple scenes, not only by segregation, but also due to the position of people within the workplace.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a framework to analyze power dynamics through the use of language. It contains a concept of "face", in which a desire for approval (positive) and desire for autonomy (negative), that helps in explaining how linguistic choices can reinforce racial hierarchy.

In the film "*Hidden Figures*", register and politeness highlights the power hierarchy. Politeness strategies are known as communicative methods which are used to manage social interactions in a way that reduces offense. (Fiveable, n.d.) The power hierarchy in the film is as white men being in higher status, and Black women being in lower status. The white supervisors consistently threaten Black women's negative face through dismissals and direct commands "Get me the numbers Katherine. Now" (Schroeder&Melfi, 2015, p.34) , and also expect positive face work in return from them. In their colloquial language, white men speak downwards, shown from their register and politeness. These strategies help reflect the racial and gender hierarchy of the workplace in the 1960s. Male supervisor characters address Black female mathematicians differently, by their first names. They are addressed to as "Katherine", "Mary", "Dorothy". On the other hand, they need to use formal addresses, such as "Mr. Harrison", "Mr. Stafford", "Sir". Katherine must use formal titles, responding with "Yes, Mr. Harrison" (Schroeder & Melfi, 2015, p.45) The consistent antinomy of address pattern reflects unequal politeness expectations as Black women were expected to use titles while being addressed with their first names. According to Brown & Levinson, this imbalance can represent unequal politeness as Katherine performs positive politeness while receiving negative face.

Pronoun choice is used to reinforce racial exclusion. In the film, one of the main characters, Katherine Goble, is transferred to an all-white unit. She works at NASA, but has to walk half a mile to go to the bathroom as there is not one for Black people in the unit. When she asks for the bathroom, she is told, “Sorry, I have no idea where your bathroom is.” (Schroeder & Melfi, 2015, p. 29) for an answer. The use of “your” is a deictic marker for the attitude towards Black people in that scene. This pronoun choice is an example of register and politeness and a speech act. (Vance, 2021) The possessive pronoun “your”, in addition, reinforces Katherine’s lower social position in the workplace. It also shows a lack of politeness, reflecting that the character chooses not to do it.

With the linguistic distancing strategy created by the use of the pronoun “your”, the bathroom for Black people is separated from the workplace, which is implied by the characters. The dismissive tone and language used while creating the sentence also shows how the cultural ideas about the topic were normalized and acted out in colloquial language, reinforcing the exclusion. The use of language is rooted in cultural beliefs of the time. Such as what is said by the church after the establishment of Jim Crow Laws, or what the majority of people thought like. Due to the timeline and background of the segregation laws, the idea that they are separated but not equal resulted in considerable amounts of disrespect and discrimination, also reflected by the use of language through the film.

B. 2. Speech Acts

Defined as a fundamental unit of communication that conveys specific intentions and functions within language, speech acts can include commands, interruptions, dismissals, or apologies that reveal power relationships. (Vance, 2021) Command usage normally includes phrases like “Please”, “Could you” etc.

However, when white men speak to one of the characters, they use direct commands consistently, such as; “Get me the numbers”(Schroeder & Melfi, 2015, p. 34), “Go check the figures.” (p.41) The power imbalance is linguistically marked through the use of these direct commands.

Another speech act can be given as interruptions. When she suggests corrections, or tries explaining, the character Katherine is interrupted by white male characters, such as Paul Stafford. The interruptions reflect the power dynamics, as Paul Stafford uses the speech act of interruption to limit her visibility in the team.

Dismissals and refusals are used as speech acts portraying exclusion. An example of dismissals in the film can be given when the character Katherine tries to help, though receives responses such as “We don’t need a computer in here.”(Schroeder & Melfi, 2015, p. 52), “That’s not your concern.” (p.58), “You don’t need to worry about that.” (p.59) She is being excluded from important concepts in the workplace by people refusing her help, restricting her participation. Through the use of direct commands, refusals, dismissals, interruptions the film “*Hidden Figures*” demonstrates the idea that discrimination is evident through speech acts.

While these linguistic patterns demonstrate power dynamics, it could be argued that some direct commands and interruptions may reflect general workplace hierarchy rather than racial discrimination. Nevertheless, since there is a consistent pattern across all interactions with Black women, this suggests that these speech acts are racially motivated.

B. 3. Tone and Code-Switching

Defined in the macro-choices category of linguistic choices in sociolinguistics, code switching occurs when two or more languages exist in a community at the same time. (Coulmas, 2005) In this situation, people are not required to use one, and usually go back and forth, which are variations of a single language, English, in the film “*Hidden Figures*”, in which characters change their tone relative to the power dynamics in the workplace. First seen from the women modifying their speech, code-switching is dominantly used. However, code-switching does not require the switch between two languages, and can be from informal to formal English like seen in this example. In Katherine’s monologue, her tone shifts from a polite one to assertive and direct, which results in the silence in the workplace after. Her tone shift demonstrates the breaking of the expected submissive tone for her during that time.

Code switching can be demonstrated from another character, Dorothy Vaughan. With white supervisors, she has a formal and careful tone, whereas with her team, she is more natural and relaxed. While demanding her position for IBM management, she has an assertive and confident tone. The code-switching and tone allow for the language to reflect the discriminatory actions these characters had to face. Her shift from formal register to natural speech demonstrates code-switching as a sociolinguistic adaptation strategy, allowing her to navigate the workplace hierarchy. Furthermore, this strategy demonstrates how Black women developed communication strategies to survive in segregated environments.

The bathroom issue can be summarized as Katherine’s supervisor getting unhappy about her spending forty minutes on breaks. While the reason is that the bathroom for Black people is half a mile away, Katherine gets yelled at. This results in Katherine making a powerful monologue, with her explaining that it is not her fault, which creates a complete silence in the

workplace after. Although she was the one being silenced before, after the monologue, starting with “there are no colored bathrooms...” (Schroeder & Melfi, 2015, p. 67), the room gets silent.

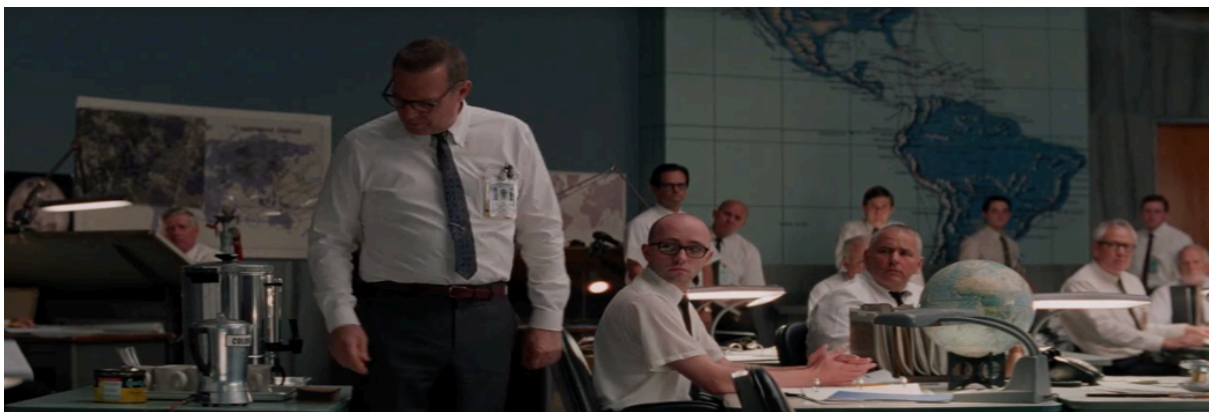
Other employees react to her monologue with shock and listen carefully with concern. They look at her as though she made the most crucial and risky decision of her life, which is only explaining her situation to her supervisor. Their concerned glances, reflecting how normalized racism actually is, are given in the first reference shot. Her work acquaintances’ expressions indicate the fear they feel for her, as she was trying to have her own right against a white male authority figure. The society’s perspective regarding this issue can be conveyed through the looks on employees’ faces when she talks, as they function as a representation of attitudes towards Black women.



Reference Shot 1: Hidden Figures, Internet Archive, 1:02:33

In her speech, Katherine refers to a “coffee pot that none of you want to touch.” (Schroeder & Melfi, 2015, p. 67). Earlier in the film, a coffee pot labeled “colored” is introduced in the background. Used as a visual marker the coffee pot reflects the social boundaries and discrimination in the workplace.

After she uses it, none of the other scientists want to touch the pot to get coffee (*Reference Shot 2, the labeled coffee pot*), like they are disgusted to pour coffee from the same pot. The visual semiotic of the “colored” label on the coffee constructs racial inequality. This visual lexical marker and label’s placement signals how Katherine is linguistically distanced through pronoun usage. This scene shows the everyday struggles Black people in segregated workplaces had to face, since everything from toilets to coffee pots differed for Black and white people.



Reference Shot 2: Hidden Figures, Internet Archive, 1:03:19

Through these types of scenes, the film “*Hidden Figures*” portrays the racial segregation by reflecting the historical events taking place during the time of the film. The historical background, shaping peoples’ perspectives reveals how racism was strong and seen through language, word choices and visuals in the film. However, this segregation does not only depend on race.

B. 4. Lexical Choices

The lexical choices made in the film “*Hidden Figures*” also reflect how the language is used to distance and exclude Black women in the 1960s workplace in America. The examples of lexical choices include the use of “colored”, “girls”, “computers”, which will be explained by specific examples.

In the sub-section “*Speech Acts*”, the monologue of Katherine is introduced. After that, it shifts to the “colored” labelled coffee pot. The use of “colored” is constant, and seen in colloquial language of the characters and written, such as the “colored bathroom”. The signs used in the “colored computers” and “colored bathroom” are visual semiotics. The constant repetition of color is also used as a racialized lexical marker, and separates Black people from their white colleagues in that workplace. The racism in the workplace is embedded by the lexical marker used with the word “colored”. The repetition of “colored” with colloquial language and labels on items like the coffee pot categorizes Black people as “others”.

Another example of lexical choices from the film can be given as “computers”. They do analysis and engineering, though instead of labels like “analyst” and “engineer”, the women are labeled as “computers”. This positions them as a tool, and reflects a workplace ideology. It implies that their labor is essential, and dehumanizes them.

In the film, NASA has a segregated division called “West Computing Group”. It is composed of Black female mathematicians that worked through equations to make the planes faster and safer. Their calculations were crucial and fastened the process of the space race taking place with Russia. Although, their work had to be done in a separate office, with mismatched chairs, and on the other side of the campus. The film represents occupational segregation visually, making the Black women work in a separate office, with different conditions. How the team is separated from the white male engineers also reflects how the workplace culture was shaped throughout the Jim Crow era. The group was located in the building with “West Computing Group” labeled with big white letters.

The women in this group are also constantly referred to as “girls” as a lexical choice. Although, their male colleagues have titles such as “engineers”, “gentlemen”, and are referred to with “Mr.” This juxtaposition between male and female characters in the workplace highlights the language’s contribution to the racial and gender hierarchy.

C. Cultural and Societal Interpretation

In this section, the linguistic findings and patterns will be connected to the 1960s society in America. The analysis will focus on three aspects of the film; what the language usage shows, the speech patterns demonstrating resistance and adaptation, how the film reflects and challenges cultural norms.

C. 1. What the Language Usage Shows

Identified in the section above, the linguistic choices highlight how the cultural beliefs, racial and gender hierarchies affected the workplace in 1960s America. The constant contrast between how white males and Black females are presented to reflect the Jim Crow era. It reflects the cultural expectation there that politeness was not required for addressing Black people but was obligatory for addressing white people. The specific lexical choices such as the use of “colored”, “girls”, “computers” helped reveal that the workplace interactions were also shaped by the cultural ideologies.

C. 2. Speech Patterns Demonstrating Resistance and Adaptation

In a historical context, resistance can be seen as protests, or even small acts of resilience like in the film “*Hidden Figures*”. The speech patterns, such as Katherine being polite to her tone shifting to assertive in her monologue can be given as an example that demonstrates

resistance. Instead of her restrained politeness, she is direct, signaling resistance. Her tone shifts to assertive, which disrupts her expected register, resisting discriminatory structures.

Another example can be given as Dorothy's code-switching. This resembles adaptation as she uses a formal and submissive linguistic style with her white coworkers whereas her tone in the West Computing Group is authoritative and encouraging. She uses code-switching for adaptation, reflecting the linguistic lengths that Black women needed to go through to adapt to a white male dominated workplace.

C. 3. "Hidden Figures" Reflecting and Challenging Cultural Norms

With the use of linguistics and language, the film "*Hidden Figures*" reveals the cultural beliefs and norms of racial segregation and gender bias of 1960s America. However, these norms and beliefs are also challenged with the tool of language. Katherine's monologue challenges the norm that Black women need to be silent, Dorothy insisting on recognition and her title with the confident language challenges her exclusion. The experience of the character, Dorothy was given to demonstrate how occupational roles for Black women were limited and some of the challenges they have faced. The film's use of workplace interactions and settings help visualize the problem, showing the effect of the cultural and societal norms about Black women in a workplace.

Women being unappreciated in workplaces, and most STEM fields like NASA reflected the gender and racial segregation norms. Such as in 1960, only 1% of engineers in the United States were women. (Layne, 2009) The societal norm for women to not work at male-dominated fields like STEM, were also portrayed in the film "*Hidden Figures*". Mary Jackson's speech in the courtroom further demonstrates the use of language to contest

cultural beliefs. Through legal and social systems, with the aim of dismantling segregation, Mary Jackson speaks up in the courtroom. She uses persuasive rhetoric, and logical arguments (logos) in order to show her qualifications and persuade the judge. She then uses emotional appeal to withstand the norm that women, specifically Black women do not belong in engineering. After Mary Jackson becomes an engineer, people are congratulating her instead of creating more obstacles, and the reference shot implies that there is a change going on. The shift of the characters is used as a tool to demonstrate the change that occurred after resistance, such as the Civil Rights Movement.



Reference Shot 4: Hidden Figures, Internet Archive, 1:57:35

Although the film portrays a population of discrimination and segregation, it uses language as a tool by disrupting cultural expectations. With the use of strategic lexical choices, shifts in tone and linguistic resistance, the film “*Hidden Figures*” uses language as a mirror of the culture, and to alter its beliefs by challenging them.

D. Comparative Insights

In this section, the linguistic features within the film “*Hidden Figures*” will be examined in a comparative perspective. How the same linguistic choices operate across the contexts of the represented historical period and the modern audience that interprets the film will be analyzed. Through this comparison, the evaluation of how the language reflects and

challenges societal norms and attitudes can be made. This analysis focuses on the evolving social meaning of language, as well as its role in reshaping cultural attitudes towards Black women in the workplace. This section will analyze the reinterpretation of the 1960s language through the audience reception.

D.1. Reinterpreting the 1960s Language

The audience reception of today differs from the 1960s context. Due to the social structure of the time period; the use of direct commands, interruptions, “colored” were interpreted to be normal in the 1960s. However, as a result of the greater awareness of racial and gender inequality, this usage of language may be interpreted as discriminatory and condescending in a modern audience. Therefore, this shift in interpretation of the audience shows how language’s social meaning evolves, and also changes cultural values and attitudes across time periods.

The film “*Hidden Figures*” is a modern film that looks back to the 1960s. Thus, it is not a documentary and uses language symbolically. Specific usages of language are made in order to appeal to the audience. For example, it strategically preserves linguistic markers that modern audiences would perceive as discriminatory, such as “your bathroom”, creating a representation of historical discrimination. In addition, one of the side characters says “A female engineer. We’re Negro, baby. Ain’t no such thing” (Schroeder & Melfi, 2015, p. 39) This highlights how even the group affected by the segregation used to refer themselves using “Negro”, which appears discriminatory today. The reinterpreted language emphasizes how some phrases can reveal culture and segregation. Consequently, the film creates the idea that language can shape and reflect cultural beliefs. The linguistic meaning evolves over time, resulting in a diachronic linguistic change.

E. Conclusion

From the sociolinguistic analysis and investigation done for this essay, it can be concluded that the film “*Hidden Figures*” conveys cultural attitudes towards Black women in the 1960s American workplace, with the use of language which mirrors the discrimination they had to face and resistance against it. The society’s perspectives towards Black women were shaped by the political problems going on during the 1960s, such as the Jim Crow era shaping how people see African-Americans. This later on, turned to be a cultural and societal norm, where it was unusual not to treat people poorly just because they are Black. In the film, specific linguistic choices that create the dismissive tone of other people in the workplace were used to indicate how the racial and gender prejudices were the norm. From the three protagonists Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Katherine Johnson, resistance occurred which challenged the cultural norm. They all had to fight for their achievements, such as Mary Jackson speaking up in court, then becoming America’s first female African-American aeronautical engineer.

Their assertive tone reflects a linguistic choice that was used to challenge these prejudices. The film displays that language reflects cultural and societal values. Still, they have articles about the characters as the film is based on real life, and their biographies are still available on the website of NASA. Overall, the film “*Hidden Figures*” portrays society's perspectives and cultural attitudes towards Black women through a modern angle, using a story of real life. This film helps convey people’s perspectives and reflects the historical part with it. It illustrates that language is a powerful tool, which can be used for both empowerment and oppression. However, it does not only use the 1960s language, and reframes it for the 21st century audience.

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