



Verbal Sign in Music Video of *This Is America* by Childish Gambino

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Abstract

This study was intended to identify the verbal sign used in the music video This Is America by Childish Gambino. This study applied a qualitative library research approach. Based on that approach, the data were drawn according to the theories applied in this study. The data was collected by note taking technique and documentation methods. The first theory implemented was the verbal sign proposed by Dyer. It was applied to analyze the verbal sign in the music video. The second theory appealed was the theory of meaning proposed by Leech to analyze the meaning used in the music video. The results revealed that the meaning of the lyrics refers to the African American society's predicament of racism, police brutality, violence and gun possession. The lyrics contained the connotative and conceptual meaning.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a system of functional differences and oppositions. It can be in the form of a spoken or written communication media used by human beings to deliver their thought, idea, and feelings. Foley (1997:27) stated that language is usually defined as a system of signs and their rules of combination. The study about the system of signs and the whole thing which involve in meaning as a part of communication known as semiotics.

De Saussure declared that semiotics is a science that studies the role of signs as a part of social life and it also would be a part of social psychology, and general psychology (cited in Chandler, 2002:2). In semiotics, a sign is simply a signal that people can receive via senses,

and can interpret these signals in a way that gives them meaning. Peirce (1931-58,2.172) stated that anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something and referring to something other than itself. A sign has two characteristics; signifier and signified. The signifier is usually interpreted as the material (or physical) form of the sign – it is something which can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted – it can be in the form of a word, sound, or the image itself. The signified is somewhere between 'a mental image, a concept and a psychological reality' (Eco 1976, 14-15).

Signifier and signified can be found in a sign. In conclusion, a sign is a combination of a signifier with a particular signified.

Generally, a sign can be divided into two different parts which are visual and verbal signs. The visual sign refers to the picture. Visual sign in the communication process is delivered through gesture, appearance, facial expressions presented in the form of images and carry meanings. Meanwhile, verbal sign is related to the word or phrase that implies meanings and in the form of oral or written text. Signs can be seen in any aspect of life, including in the music video.

The combination of songs and pictures is a music video. People and music could be defined in economic terms of demand and supply or cause and effect.

Nowadays, the demand of a music video has taken high interest of the public along with the explosion of data and topic which easily caught the world attention. Video communication such as music video further fits the need of consumers-most consumers read much less and rather prefer to watch a video (Insivia, 2006). Music videos often supply with public's desire or the situation in the society nowadays.

This Is America was released by Donald Glover under his musical moniker Childish Gambino. The main reason for choosing this music video because real-world referents with the fact that there are so many hidden signs imply America's problem nowadays such as racism, gun violence, discrimination between white and black people and injustice. The content of the song lyric is meaningful and supported the music video in a lot of aspects. Thus, the verbal sign is an interesting object concerns to analyse.

Based on the introduction above, this study was aimed to find the verbal sign found in the music video.

METHOD AND THEORY

Research method is a procedure used to do scientific writing. The methodology

used in analyzing the data in this research includes the following points.

The data of this study was taken from *This Is America* music video. It is a song published by a well-known American rapper Childish Gambino as well-known as Donald Glover and with the help of Ludwig Goransson as the writer and producer. It was debuted on May 5th 2018 during the Saturday Night Live which was hosted by Childish Gambino. Hiro Murai as the lead director of the music video had received more than 13 million views within 24 hours span and has over 385 million views as of September 2018. This music video has depth and used imagery to frame and highlight the major issues in America. Thus, the verbal sign portrayed in the music video became interesting to analyse and relevant.

In collecting the data, this study used documentation method and note-taking technique. First, the music video "*This is America*" was chosen and downloaded from YouTube https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=this+is+america; then, the music video played repeatedly and intensively to understand the verbal sign that can be found in the music video. Third, the data noted down.

The collected data was analysed by using a qualitative method. There were several steps to analyse the data. First, the data found in the music video analysed by using the theory of verbal sign proposed by Dyer and also the theory of meaning by Leech. Third, rechecked the analysis found after collecting all these data. Finally, cross-check the results found according to the classifications and applied theories. Lastly, the results were descriptively presented in an informal method.

Review of Literatures

In the literature review, some studies had been conducted and have a similar topic to the current study. Those studies

were reviewed to support the process of this study.

The research proposed by Petrilli (2007) discussed a phenomenological and semiotic analysis of sensibility, or feeling, in the era of globalization which is the era of global communication: how are such things as time, space, self, others, life, death, etc perceived in today's world.

The study proposed by Umagandhi (2017) discussed the Leech's seven types of meaning in semantics which are conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social and affective meaning, reflected and collective meaning, associative meaning and thematic meaning.

Meanwhile, communication's medium influences distance preferences, such that people's preference for communicating a message to a distant (vs. proximal) target is greater for verbal compared with pictorial communications (Trope, 2013).

Verbal sign in advertisements consists of words that do not only describe things, communicate feelings and associate attitudes, but also bring ideas to your mind (Candra, 2019).

A research statement shows that a verbal cue in the form of hearing a word can influence even the most elementary visual processing and inform our understanding of how language affects perception Spivey (2020). Najafian (2011) stated that a sign can also represent meaning about the social relations of those engaged in communication, the interpersonal function. Li (2008) proposed in his study that social semiotics and multimodal discourse are suggested in facilitating these processes of deconstruction to address several controversial issues presented in the packaging. Other studies proposed by Klimesch (1982) stated that visual characteristics are better retained if targets have been verbalized. Negm (2015) in his research stated that the use

of imagery impacts costumers' perception because it increases recall, enhances attitude toward the promoted matter, and affects behavioral intentions.

Other studies proposed by Prawiranatha (2018) stated that verbal and visual signs are related to one another, verbal sign as the part that describes what is meant by visual sign and the visual sign as the part that illustrates what is meant by the verbal sign. Nugraha (2019) stated that the relation between verbal and visual signs can be seen as the verbal signs supporting the presentation of the visual signs by adding any information.

Some previous studies (e.g. Sumanjaya, 2015; Windiyawati, 2011; Pidada, 2008) mainly discuss verbal and visual signs. Meanwhile, the current study only used a verbal sign.

Theory of Semiotic

The term 'semiotic' is derived from Greek 'semeion' which means sign. Semiotics is the study of signs. Saussure (cited in Chandler, 2001) defines semiotics as the science of the life of sign in society. However, this study is only focused on the verbal sign as follows:

Verbal Sign

Proposed by Dyer (1993:34), verbal sign representation in a medium of audio. Dyer argued in his statements:

"Different people 'read' and interpret texts in different ways, and it is possible to ask different groups of consumers how they interpret or understand a specific text" (1986:87).

According to Dyer (1986:87) that there are two ways to identify the meaning of a text which are: non-textual analysis and textual analysis. The non-textual analysis is used to identify the meaning by asking the producer/author the meaning. Meanwhile, textual analysis is used to identify the meaning based on interpreter perspectives.

Theory of Meaning

According to Leech (1981: 9), meaning can be classified into seven types, however, this study focused only on conceptual and connotative meaning.

Conceptual Meaning

According to Leech (1981: 9), the conceptual meaning is widely assumed to be a central factor in linguistic communication.

Connotative Meaning

According to Leech (1981: 12), the connotative meaning is the communicative value an expression has by virtue what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual content.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As proposed by Dyer (1993) that verbal sign relates to the portrayal of visual communication which will show how people communicate. The music video has complex analysis in term of the meaning of the song lyrics. Thus, this relation often created such a component such as pictures, idea executions, relationship and personal feelings associated with the productions. As complex as it sounds, the meaning analysed based on Leech's theory.

The Meanings of Verbal Sign Contained in The Song Lyrics of Childish Gambino's Music Video *This Is America*

Based on Leech (1981) statement in his book *Semantics The Study of Meaning* stated that meaning has its linguistic phenomenon which can be recognized through its relations of meaning. Further analysis of verbal signs can be seen as follows. These lyrics taken from official website of Genius.com of *This Is America*.

Intro (Choir)

The songs revealed with a gospel choir. Gospel originally attains from old

English which are (good) spell (news, message). Those words combined as 'good news'. Its originality comes from American South during the era of servitude. This Intro lyric taken from official website of Genius.com of *This Is America* produced by Ludwig Goransson & Childish Gambino.

[4-1] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
Yeah, yeah, yeah, go, go away

According to the intro lyrics of *This Is America*, it can be observed that the words '**go away**' are part of conceptual meaning. As Leech stated that this conceptual meaning will help to distinguish the meaning of a word. The choir inferring that the listeners can just '**go away**' and don't give any consideration as there isn't any predicament.

Bridge

This bridge lyric taken from official website of Genius.com of *This Is America* produced by Ludwig Goransson & Childish Gambino. The bridge verse of *This Is America* below:

[4-2] We just wanna party
Party just for you
We just want the money
Money just for you (Yeah)
I know you wanna party
Party just for free
Girl, you got me dancin' (Girl,
you got me dancin')
Dance and shake the frame
(Yeah)

Further, the first line of the verse in this conceptual meaning is the word **party**. As Leech have stated that this conceptual meaning is essential part to learn the meaning. The word **party** means a cultural celebration at which a group of people meets to talk, eat, drink, dance, often to commemorate a particular occasion. Following that, in the data, the lines **we just want the money** in this conceptual meaning is the word **money** that means coins or notes that are used to purchase items. Last but not least in the

bridge part are the words *shake* and *frame*. In this case, *shake* means when the body performs quick short movement and *the frame* indicates the size and shape of someone's body. The lines say *dance and shake the frame* is to move one's body in the party.

Chorus

This chorus lyric taken from official website of Genius.com of *This Is America* produced by Ludwig Goransson & Childish Gambino.

[4-3] This is America
Don't catch you slippin' now
Don't catch you slippin' now
Look what I'm whippin' now

In this chorus verse, the second line of the verse consists of connotative meaning. This means, in other words, *do not catch you making a mistake*. This is addressed to the injustices of police brutality in America and ignorance of acts or hate. The line of *look what I'm whippin now* also consists of connotative meaning as it does not merely mean the punishment of being hit in this song. It explains that look at what one's making. *'I'* here refers to Childish Gambino as he misled the political difficulties of America and the gun violence that happened by formulating engaging lyrics and choreography moves of African-Americans.

Verse 1

This verse 1 lyric taken from official website of Genius.com of *This Is America* produced by Ludwig Goransson & Childish Gambino. The first verse of This is America shown as below:

[4-4] This is America (Skrrt, skrrt)
Don't catch you slippin' now (Ayy)
Look how I'm livin' now
Police be trippin' now (Woo)

Above verse, the third line of the verse is a conceptual meaning. This line has a blatant purpose of asserting the facts of prevailing as a black man in

America. The data in Verse 1 lyrics, the last line has connotative meaning.

[4-5] Yeah, this is America
(Woo, ayy)
Guns in my area
(Word, my area)
I got the strap (Ayy, ayy)
I gotta carry 'em
Yeah, yeah, I'ma go into this

The data above, the second line showed conceptual meaning. Gambino goes on addressing gun ownership and gun violence. In the next line of the lyric, *I got the strap* is the connotative meaning of the word *strap*. *'Strap'* is a slang used to soften the image of the real peril of guns. Americans glorify owning of a gun.

The last two lines of the verse are conceptual meaning. Based on the lyrics, Gambino validated about his gun ownership that he obliges carry one due to the environmental influence around him.

[4-6] Yeah, yeah, this is guerilla (Woo)

Further, into the verse, connotative meaning showed in the word *guerilla*. There are two references for this is guerilla. The first reference is an interpretation of guerilla warfare and the other is a theory connected to the invisible gorilla-experiment.

[4-7] Yeah, yeah, I'ma go get the bag
Yeah, yeah, or I'ma get the pad
Yeah, yeah, I'm so cold like, yeah
I'm so dope like, yeah (Woo)
We gon' blow like, yeah (Straight up, uh)

The interpretation of getting *'the bag'* is the connotative meaning of an implication of getting of money from rapping and if Gambino doesn't, he will require to go back to his *pad* and *paper* and resume on writing to be able to earn some money.

Refrain

This refrain lyric taken from official website of Genius.com of *This Is America* produced by Ludwig Goransson & Childish Gambino. This part also can

be apprehended in the gospel choir. In the music video, the choir was a representation of black people's life collectively and die together to fight against injustices.

[4-8] Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh, tell somebody

You go tell somebody

Grandma told me

Get your money, Black man The **'tell somebody'** part is connotative meaning based Leech theory is concern with the communicative value that the word has Therefore, it symbolizes the necessity of the black people to continue to vocalize the rights that they deserve to possess. The line **'get your money'** is to get respect from society by being financially successful.

Verse 2

This verse 2 lyrics taken from official website of Genius.com of *This Is America* produced by Ludwig Goransson & Childish Gambino. This verse emphasizes the superficial, consumerist society that people endure nowadays.

[4-9] Look how I'm geekin' out (Hey)

I'm so fitted (I'm so fitted, woo)

I'm on Gucci (I'm on Gucci)

I'm so pretty (Yeah, yeah, woo)

I'm gon' get it (Ayy, I'm gon' get it)

Watch me move (Blaow)

Above verse, the first line is connotative meaning. This word is translated to the real word terms by using Leech theory. In this case, Gambino is very engaged in bringing racism to the entire world by producing a music video and getting the message out to the public. Continuous to the verse, have connotative meaning. As many events and incidents happened in America and mimicked in the music video, simply having bunch of cash and obtaining a greater status doesn't dilute the African American people from racial attitudes and treatments.

[4-10] This a celly (Ha)

That's a tool (Yeah)

On my Kodak (Woo) Black

Ooh, know that (Yeah, know that, hold on)

Get it (Woo, get it, get it) Ooh, work it

In this verse, the first line of the verse consists of connotative meaning. The police shooting that leads Stephon Clark as a victim, he was unarmed black man. The tragedy occurred on March 18th, 2018. There was a police officer who shot him presumed that Clark was allegedly accountable for robberies that had happened in the neighbourhood was armed with a gun **'tool'** meanwhile the fact was only his phone **'celly'**.

[4-11] Hunnid bands, hunnid bands,

hunnid bands (Hunnid bands)

Contraband, contraband, contraband
(Contraband)

I got the plug in Oaxaca (Woah)

They gonna find you like "blocka"
(Blaow)

There are several significant connotative words in this verse. A **'band'** means thousand dollars, **'hunnid bands'** is a hundred thousand dollars, **'contraband'** is goods that have been illegally smuggled, **'Oaxaca'** is a state in Mexico which well-known of its various narcotic thing, a **'plug'** relates to a drug merchant and **'blocka'** signifies the tone of a gun.

Refrain

This refrain lyrics taken from official website of Genius.com of *This Is America* produced by Ludwig Goransson & Childish Gambino. Gambino was dancing on an old pile of rummage cars with SZA appearing and was sitting on the canopy of a car.

[4-12] Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh, tell somebody

America, I just checked my following
list, and You go tell
somebody

You mothafuckas owe me

In this refrain verse, the first line has connotative meaning. The next line verse, has conceptual meaning. Leech stated

that the conceptual meaning provides the interpretation of a sentence. The word *tell* means to say something to someone, often providing them information or guidance. This supported by the last line of the verse, which has conceptual meaning. Gambino portrays *owe* here as, over the last few years, this awareness should transpire.

Outro

This outro lyrics taken from official website of Genius.com of *This Is America* produced by Ludwig Goransson & Childish Gambino. The outro is the last section of the song's structure. In the line *you just a black man in this world* has conceptual meaning. It notifies us Gambino feels concerning his status as an African American citizen today which supported the conceptual meaning by Leech. The next line is *you just a barcode, drivin' expensive foreigners* have connotative meaning. This reinforces the pursuit of material gain and financial freedom become the focus of African American and again it has done only little to give them the true meaning of liberty and prosperity.

[4-13] You just a big dawg, yeah
 I kenneled him in the backyard
 No, probably ain't life to a dog
 For a big dog

Connotative meaning can be seen in this whole verse of lyrics. *The first line of the verse Big dawg* means one who does everything essentially well and doesn't take any crap from anyone. The rest of the lines in the verse have really strong connotative meaning and become the important lines to end the outro of the song. Gambino used the slang term to claim that black man treated such a lesser class and simply pushed to be treated as less than human.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the analysis that have been carefully studied, the conclusion of this study can be conclude as follow.

The lyric of *This Is America* containing the connotative and conceptual meaning. These two meanings carry messages to present to the public the conflict within the singer and African American culture. Childish Gambino overall message is to not allow the entertainment, social media, current popular culture distract the existing obstacles of African American society facing every day. Thus, the *This Is America* itself stimulates the lyric and the viewers can understand that the message and the meaning of the whole concept of the music video itself.

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