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Language and Race: A Keyword Study

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LANGUAGE AND RACE: A KEYWORD STUDY

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This study aims to identify keywords in a corpus of American English texts including the terms *people of color* and *person of color*. Keywords are unusually frequent words within a target corpus, a collection of texts selected based on specific criteria, in comparison to a reference corpus, a representative collection of texts from various sources and domains in a language. Keywords can reveal ideological undercurrents of texts allowing for elaboration upon current racial ideologies as they are expressed through language. While previous studies discuss changes in the language used to describe race, evidence from research focused on identifying and analyzing keywords in spoken and written discourse containing the terms *people of color* and *person of color* is scant. Several studies criticized the use of these terms noting the racial dichotomy and lack of race-neutrality perpetuated by the terminology. Other studies gave increased attention to the role of language around race and the use of language-centered racism denial practices. Through this study, I examine if these criticisms are substantiated by the ideological undercurrent of texts including the terms *people of color* and *person of color*. I built a target corpus by compiling texts from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) that include the terms *people of color* and *person of color*, resulting in a corpus of 1,645,447 words. I used COCA as a reference corpus, because it is a large American English corpus with over one billion words of text from eight genres (fiction, newspapers, academic texts, TV, web pages, etc.). Data from both the target and reference corpus was analyzed using the keyword analysis software built into the COCA database. The analysis of keywords within the target corpus identified only 3 words connected to a particular race: *white*, *whiteness*, and *black*. These findings underline the separation of black people from other people of color within the dominant racial ideology, highlighting a situation more complex than the dichotomy mentioned in previous research. The findings of this study can contribute to a better understanding of how racial ideologies in the United States are expressed and perpetuated by the language we use.