

# BIRACIAL – BLACK? A SURVEY OF LANGUAGE USE AND LANGUAGE ATTITUDES IN POLAND AND GERMANY

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## **Abstract**

The paper deals with the construction of race from the perspective of cognitive sociolinguistics. The focus is upon the perception of mixed-race people of black and white heritage in Poland and Germany compared to the USA, and its reflection in language use. The study clarifies in how far a socially marked perception of biracial people applies in these countries with very small population of black ancestry. Among other things, the first presidential campaign of Barack Obama is used to investigate the occurrence in both countries of mental colouring of biracial people. The paper also reflects the language debate on political correctness of the press language, sparked off by the presidential campaign and its media coverage. It presents claims and arguments by proponents of various solutions regarding referring to biracial people, and paradoxes showing up in the relationship between language use and ideological positions when the race issue is at stake.

## **1. Introduction**

The perception of race and ethnicity is a vast topic approachable from many angles. The following text deals selectively with a single piece of the mosaic – the perception of mixed-race people in Poland and Germany compared to the United States (while taking into account the influence of the latter on the former two), and the reflection of this perception in language use. It should make a contribution to the general picture of the social and discursive construction of race and ethnicity, emerging from efforts and pursuits in many different areas, such as social and cognitive psychology, sociology, cultural and historical studies, linguistics, and critical discourse analysis.

As the populations of Poland and Germany have different degrees of historical experience with biracial issues, and both differ very strongly again from the United States in this respect, the study may help indicate in how far history and histories influence the present-day cognitive constructs pertaining to mixed-race issues. I would like to analyse the degree to which a socially marked perception of biracial people applies in countries with very small or close to zero population of black ancestry, such as Germany and Poland, respectively. As a preliminary step, it will be clarified in how far the younger generation's concept of race in these two countries is still based on the

tripartite Cuvier-Comtean<sup>1</sup> division of biblical origin (black, white, and yellow) accepted as a matter of fact in both Germany and Poland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and treated as a point of reference in defining human races in widely distributed encyclopaedic reference works and books on human geography.

In 2008, a unique opportunity presented itself for an investigation based on a topical story – the successful presidential campaign of Barack Obama, a candidate of black and white descent, that was reported broadly by the press worldwide, including Poland and Germany. The widespread basic knowledge about the new President made it possible to investigate the social perception of biracial people in both countries by means of a survey that was meaningful to the respondents. At the same time, the campaign and its media coverage prompted a minor debate on political correctness of the press language applied in referring to people of simultaneously black and white descent. Local debates took place both in the United States and abroad, where the coverage of the campaign was based on translations from original U.S. news sources and, by necessity, reflected both their wording and the social reality they construed.

An essential aspect of the perception of biracial people in the two countries under study is the question in how far it is shaped by the phenomenon of mental colouring, which is an outstanding aspect of such perception in the United States. Among the issues involved is the arguments and ideological claims by the proponents and opponents of various linguistic solutions to the sensitive issue of referring to biracial people, and the paradoxes showing up in the relationship between linguistic judgements and ideological claims when the value-laden issue of race is at stake.

## 2. Social marking and mental colouring

To define the cognitive process of mental colouring, an explication is needed of the more general notion of social markedness, on which the former is based. The concept of social marking has been discussed in considerable detail by Brekhus (1996: 497), who defined it as “*a classification process that accents one side of the contrast as unnatural, thus tacitly naturalising the unmarked side*”. The notion of “naturalness” is itself value-laden: “*Social markedness highlights a contrast between marked phenomena that are explicitly given a social value as either positive or negative and the unmarked phenomena that are tacitly regarded as neutral or generic*” (ibid.).

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Cuvier, 1817; Auguste Comte, 1841. German Latinate terminology appears in Egon von Eickstedt, 1934. Egon von Eickstedt was the maker of the basis for the Nazi racist ideology and professor of anthropology in Mainz, Germany, until he retired in 1961. The tripartite division took upper hand over the alternative division into five races proposed by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, 1804, whose term “caucasian” survived well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States where it was popularised by C.S. Coon. In Poland, the theory of three “pure races” was propagated between the world wars and up to the 1960s by Jan Czekanowski. It should be mentioned that while von Eickstedt used his scientific authority in support of oppressing the “lower races” during the Second World War, Czekanowski is reported to have used his to save lives of many Jews;

cf. Agnieszka Juzwa-Ogińska, [http://www.promemoria.pl/arch/2003\\_7/kara/kara.html](http://www.promemoria.pl/arch/2003_7/kara/kara.html)

The concept of markedness plays a significant role in linguistics, in the description of language structure and usage in a number of areas, such as phonology, syntax, semantics, and conversation analysis. It is originally a linguistic concept; in 1930, Roman Jakobson introduced it into phonology, from which it has spread by analogy and probing to other areas. In a letter to N. Trubetzkoy, Jakobson declared ‘*a constant mutual connection between a marked and unmarked type*’ to be ‘*one of your [Trubetzkoy’s] most remarkable and fruitful ideas*’. He continued: ‘*It seems to me that it has a significance not only for linguists but also for ethnology and the history of culture, and that such historico-cultural correlations as life-death, liberty-non-liberty, sin-virtue, holidays-working days, etc., are always confined to relations a and ~ a, and that it is important to find out for any epoch, group, nation, etc., what the marked element is*’ (Trubetzkoy 1975: 162).

In the area of social categorisation of people, an example of markedness is the contrast set ‘man/woman’, with ‘man’ being the unmarked element of the pair. The lexeme ‘man’ is described as polysemous (man: male human, and man: human) in classical analytical approaches to semantics and as showing prototype effects (meaning a graded structure distinguishing centrality vs. marginality) in cognitive semantics. For categories with just two contrasting elements (subsets), prototype effects melt down to markedness.

The marked categories can be expressed by adding modifiers to category names that designate the unmarked end of the contrast set, as e.g. ‘male nurse’ – a marked category that contrasts with ‘nurse’ which is used as a generic term but strongly connotes females. In linguistics, the markedness manifests itself as a bundle of the following associated features:

- the unmarked occurs with higher frequency,
- the marked appears to represent a specialized subset of the whole,
- the marked conveys a more heavily articulated concept than the unmarked,
- distinctions that are critical within the unmarked item are ignored or neutralized when they occur within the marked item.

The last point describes mental colouring, a process that applies to the category to which markedness has been assigned, and which consists in “*intensifying the rigid contrast by figuratively painting all members of the marked category under a single stereotyped image*” (Brekhus 1996: 497), that is, all category members perceived as “looking the same”, or not distinguishable from each other in a way relevant to categorization.

Brekhus’ (1996) illustrative example of mental colouring in social categorisation of people is the concept of virginity. Virginity is a type of sexual identity based on creating a binary opposition between the positively connoted absence of sexual intercourse and having any amount, however slight, of such experience. In this binary scheme, the difference between having had one, and having had no sexual intercourse is categorial and the difference between having had one and three hundred cases of intercourse is not categorial and, consequently, not lexicalised.

### 3. Social colouring of blackness in America

The concepts of social markedness and mental colouring are essential for the comprehension of the perception and categorisation of biracial people of black and white descent in the United States. This categorisation is based on an ideal-type convention for assigning marked identities and thus preventing categories from overlapping, known in its most rigid form as the one-drop rule. The conceptual exclusion of overlapping between the categories of black and white is made possible by applying the ‘rule of the excluded middle’ – introducing the pair  $x - \sim x$  as the classification criterion, where  $x$  is having a black ancestor and  $\sim x$  is its opposite, that is, having no black ancestor (rather than having a white one).

While holding a lecture about this and associated topics for a mixed U.S. and European audience, I became acutely aware of the impossibility of producing a text on racial perceptions in the United States that would be adequate to the very different background knowledge and experience of these two different groups at the same time. The differences became very evident in that things new and exotic to the latter group were self-evidential truisms to the former one. The following two sections summarise the history and the current practice of categorisation by the one-drop-rule (as the extreme form of the rule of the excluded middle) for the sake of those (mainly non-American) readers for whom it is news.

### 4. A concise history of one-drop rule

In a nutshell, over the duration of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several different but similar classificatory criteria of blackness for judicial and administrative purposes co-existed, with legal blacks defined variedly as those who had one or more black African among eight, sixteen, or thirty-two ancestors (in one generation) in different states, with a brief episode of counting Mulattoes as a category separate from ‘pure black’ by the Census Bureau between 1900 and 1920. Alternatively, and this definition became wide-spread, a person was registered as being black if she or he had any known black African ancestors within the recorded history. This is the most encompassing definition of the one-drop-rule, with one in thirty two coming close to it for practical purposes, given that it covers the genealogical tree for six generations, i.e. approximately 150 years. The last widely known case of judicial confirmation of the principle was the case *Phipps vs. Louisiana* in 1985, where the applicant, applying for reclassification as white in her passport, lost the case in the state and federal courts on the grounds of having three black ancestors among thirty-two. The U.S. Supreme Court rejected to deal with the issue as it was judged insubstantial for federal affairs. To put this into perspective, it should be mentioned that among many categories of race and ethnicity in the United States, the category of blacks is the only one to which the one-drop-rule has been applied.

According to Davis (2001: 5), “*this definition emerged from the American South to become the nation’s definition, generally accepted by Blacks and whites alike*”. Although the practice of self-definition (to be more precise, the definition by the head of the family for its members) began in 1960, this does not seem to have introduced any

significant fluctuation in the membership of the black category, thus indicating that those on whom the rule was enforced before generally apply it in their self-identification (ibid: 12). Confusing as it may be, in spite of the policy of self-definition, U.S courts have taken ‘a judicial notice’ of the application of the one-drop rule as being a matter of common knowledge (ibid.).

## 5. “Pass as white”

The historical roots of the application of the one-drop-rule, including the prominent role it played in the institution of slavery, have been analysed in the last few decades in a number of books and are well known to those who care – for the wide public, though, the principle has acquired the status of nothing less than common sense. This is reflected in language use in ways that may seem paradoxical for people not acquainted with the rule, living in countries where the race of a newly-born is not registered in birth certificates<sup>2</sup> (as is the case in at least some U.S. states<sup>3</sup>), being black or white is not granted an administrative status, and different classificatory criteria, such as physical appearance, are applied for the practical purposes of communication about racial issues. In still other countries, administrative classification persists but is based on a different mix of criteria (cf. Davis 2001).

The linguistic paradoxes produced by the application of the rule include the set phrase ‘pass as white’, applied to those whom the rule excludes from the category of whiteness while they do not manifest physical traits typical for the black population, and the notion of “discovering” that someone is black (or, seldom, white) – the discoverer and the discovered being sometimes the same person. (For people not accustomed with the rule, the question poses itself how someone could possibly pass as white or black other than by actually *being* white or black.) A quick search on the Internet reveals the wide circulation of both linguistic phenomena:

*pass/ed/ing as white* 604400  
*discovered that he was black* 1120  
*discovered that he was white* 8

*pass/ed/ing as black* 16070  
*discovered that she was black* 24  
*discovered that she was white*<sup>4</sup> 2

In accordance with the direction of mental colouring of biracial people, the phrase *pass/ed/ing as black* was applied to people who could not actually claim any black ancestry. The current widespread use of the expression and its general comprehensibility in the United States testify to the perseverance of mental colouring in the local mental model of race.

With the one-drop-rule predominating in the recent past and still enjoying recognition and verbal display (in phrases such as the above), it goes without saying that people having one black parent or grandparent are definitely perceived and referred to as being black. The gradation in traits of appearance and the diversity of heritages are not reflected in verbal references.

<sup>2</sup> This is news for many U.S. citizens.

<sup>3</sup> And this is news for many European citizens.

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved on August 22, 2010, <http://www.google.com/>.

## 6. Nominal categories and adjectival predicates

According to Brekhus (1996: 508), “*the difference between adjectives and nouns is nontrivial. Adjectives merely imply a minor identity characteristic among many, but nouns connote a specific ‘type of person’*”. In other words, talking for example of the white, the black, and the rich reflects and (re)produces more stable, distinct, clearly delineated, and socially significant categories of membership than talking of white, black or rich people. Thus, social colouring, dichotomising, and preventing categories from overlapping are led conceptually a step further if these processes result in social categories expressed by nominal expressions (cf. also strategies of nomination and predication in Discourse-Historical Approach within Critical Discourse Analysis, Reisigl/Wodak 2001).

## 7. Categorisation of biracial people in Poland and Germany: a survey

Testing conceptual categorisation of people of black and white descent in Poland and Germany, as well as the associated questions regarding the concepts of race and ethnicity in these two societies was undertaken by means of four surveys conducted in Germany and Poland. The respondents were students of English Philology<sup>5</sup>, who may not be representative of the whole population but can be expected to be relatively well-informed on current political issues. This was helpful in obtaining a high ratio of qualified responses for some items.

The first survey testing the general categorisation of the human race into human ‘races’ was distributed among 49 students in Poland and 27 in Germany. The second survey tackled the issue of mental colouring by investigating the perception of the racial categorisation of Barack Obama. It was conducted with 86 students in Poland and 54 in Germany but provided only 60 qualified responses for Polish and 22 for German because only so many Polish and German respondents had the relevant knowledge about the President’s parents.<sup>6</sup> The respondents in these two surveys partly overlapped, which made it possible to calculate correlations between some responses.

The third survey was conducted among 44 German students, and tested the views on the appropriateness of applying the labels *schwarz* and *Schwarzer* (adj. ‘black’, noun ‘Black’) in referring to Barack Obama (it could not be conducted with Polish students because of a language difference).

The fourth survey, conducted with 22 Polish and 21 German students, was a translation task and tested the comprehension of the one-drop rule as a principle of racial categorisation.

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<sup>5</sup> The students came from the state Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and the private Academy of International Studies in Łódź in Poland, and the University of Regensburg in Germany.

<sup>6</sup> There was a considerable difference, though, between German graduate students and freshmen who were the majority of the sample. Another survey, conducted among German graduate students only, showed that the prevailing majority knew Barack Obama’s descent.

## 7.1 The number of race categories

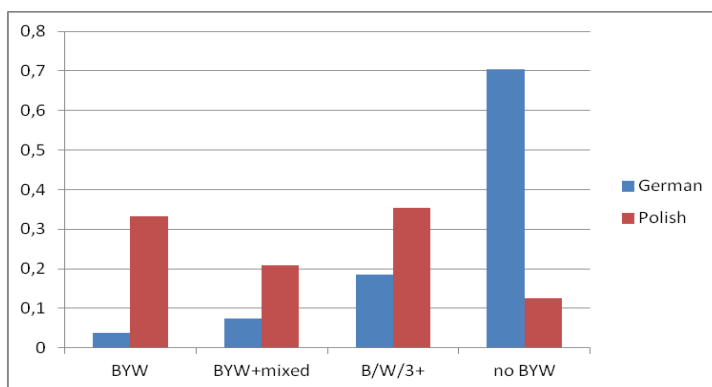
The goal of Survey 1 was to demonstrate in how far the tripartite division into white, black, and yellow race, itself of biblical origin but developed to a scientific concept in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, persists in the younger generations' conceptualisation of race. The respondents were provided with a series of pictures showing diverse people from different countries and continents and asked them to name their respective races.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the traditional categories of white, black, and yellow, the responses included, to name but a few, African, Asian, European, Mulatto, Latin-American, Afro-American, South-European, Slavic-European, South-American, negroid, caucasian, Chinese, Portuguese, and Russian. The list shows that the concept of race intermingles very strongly with notions pertaining to region and nationality. Significant differences, though, could be observed between the German and the Polish respondents.

The responses were quantified by dividing them into

- 1) those with *black*, *white*, and *yellow* (or *Asian*, *European*, *African* and *mongoloid*, *negroid*, *europoid*) as the only labels used to classify the people in the photos (BYW);
- 2) those with the additional category *Mulatto*, *mixed*, or *white/black* (BYW+1);
- 3) those with a greater number of categories (5 or more), including B or W (B/W/3+);
- 4) those with a greater number of categories, including neither B nor Y nor W (no BYW).

To form a binary contrast for some calculations, the second, third, and fourth groups were combined into the category 'other than BYW'.



**Diagram 1. Survey one: the number and kind of race categories applied to people on pictures. BYW- tripartite division black-yellow-white, BYW+mixed – as BYW plus an extra category of mixed white/black, B/W/3+ - more than four categories including white or black, no BYW – no use of the labels black, yellow, and white.**

<sup>7</sup> The pictures could not be reprinted here because most of them are copyrighted. Those of particular relevance were: item 3 - <http://photobucket.com/images/andremug-blog/>; item 6 - <http://www.sammyboy.com/showthread.php?t=21857> Ilham Anas, retrieved on January 22, 2010.

A comparison of the responses showed that relatively many Poles opted for the classical tripartite division into three races, while they frequently added some other categories such as mixed and others (Latino, Eskimo, Hindu, Arabic, Mediterranean ...). The German respondents generally abhorred any mention of white, black, and yellow in their answers. About one-third of the Poles, and just one German respondent used the pure 'black-yellow-white' scheme. At the same time, only two Polish respondents and 67% of the Germans did not use any of the labels 'yellow', 'white' (alternatively, 'Arian' in two cases), or 'black'. *Gelb* ('yellow') did not occur at all in the German answers; the label *Asiatisch/Asiat/in* was used along with *Mongolisch*, *Vietnamesisch*, *Chinesisch*, and *Inuit* to refer to people with the so-called Mongolian fold. *Weiß/Weiße/white* and *schwarz/Schwarzer* ('black') were used sporadically (in 9 out of 27 responses, i.e. 33 per cent) but in all responses except one they were accompanied by several terms pertaining to region or nationality, including 3 cases in which they were modified to White/Black American. 'Black' and 'white' were used together (i.e., by the same respondents) in just 4 out of 27 answers. In contrast, 82 per cent of the Polish ones included labels *biała* 'white', and an additional 4% (2 persons) the label *aryjska* ('Arian', a term introduced by the Nazi ideologists to refer to the race of the supposedly highest virtues); 57% used the label 'black', 8% 'Negro' and 8% 'negroid' (*czarna*, *Murzyn*, and *negroidalna*, respectively). The label 'caucasian', introduced in the United States by Coon (1962) and roughly co-referential with 'white', was used by 5 Polish respondents (3 times together with 'white': *biała kaukaska*), and none of the German respondents.

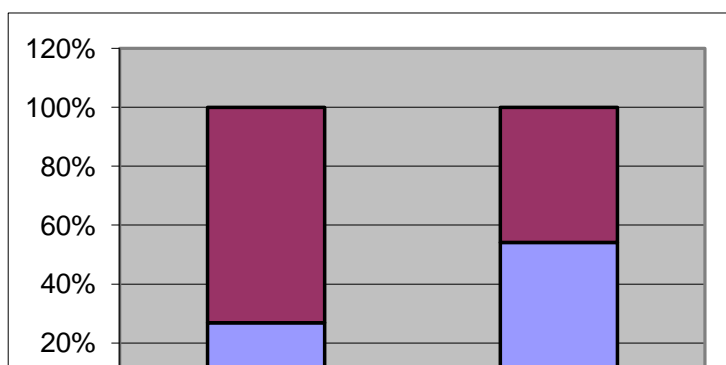
One German respondent noted they she felt uneasy categorising people according to race. Even more significantly, a German colleague whom I asked to distribute the questionnaire among his students refused for the fear of being perceived as having racist inclinations by merely addressing the topic of race, and asked me to distribute it myself. He thought that being a foreigner with a non-native accent, I would not be subject to the same kind of associations and pejorative evaluation because the students were unlikely to apply the same criteria of judgement to someone not involved with the German history. As I announced the survey as a part of a cross-European study on labelling different types of people, the respondents may have made a conscious effort to avoid confirming the notoriety of the Germans in relation to the cultivation of racist ideas. In other words, they may have avoided anything even remotely reminiscent of racist categorisation, compromised by the Fascist ideology and counteracted by the education system after the Second World War. After the results had been analysed, the students were asked by their German teacher to comment on their responses and the questions asked. The following discussion confirmed that the careful avoidance of the "colour" labels was motivated by political correctness in general and the anxiety of suggesting a racist attitude in particular. The Polish students, on the other hand, displayed a rather high degree of acceptance for the tripartite division of the human race, although it is no longer included in the school curricula; they freely used the traditional labels.

## 7.2 Categorising biracial-looking people

Survey 1 also tested the occurrence of mental colouring. Among the pictures to be labelled, there was one showing a decidedly black-looking Afro-American, and Ilham



Anas<sup>8</sup>, an Indonesian regarded as resembling Barack Obama (he was casted as Obama’s double for a television ad). It is unlikely that prior to the resemblance being “discovered” by his family, Ilham Anas was regarded to be any more African-looking than any other Indonesian (Indonesians are either ‘Caucasian’ or ‘mongoloid’ in classical classifications).<sup>9</sup> The following diagram shows how many respondents placed both pictures in the same category.



**Diagram 2. The proportion of respondents who placed the photos “XX” and “Ilham Anas” in the same category in Germany and Poland. Below: same category, above: different category.**

The difference between Polish and German respondents was significant.<sup>10</sup> By necessity, the tendency to use WYB classification correlates strongly with the identical labelling of both pictures (Pearson’s correlation coefficient =0.65); all WYB-respondents classified both of them as showing black persons (*czarna, negroidalna, or Murzyn*).<sup>11</sup>

For non-WYB respondents, the cross-cultural difference between the ratios of respondents who placed both photos in the same category was insignificant (22% for German vs. 33% for Polish). Obviously, opting for WYB strongly reinforces the racial mental colouring on which it is based; this tendency proved much stronger for the Polish students.

The second survey was concerned with the categorisation of Barack Obama, who is exceptional in being a highly known person of an exactly equal mix of the European (more recently, white American) and African descent. Asked to name Obama’s race, 37% of those 60 Polish respondents who realised that the President was biracial used the

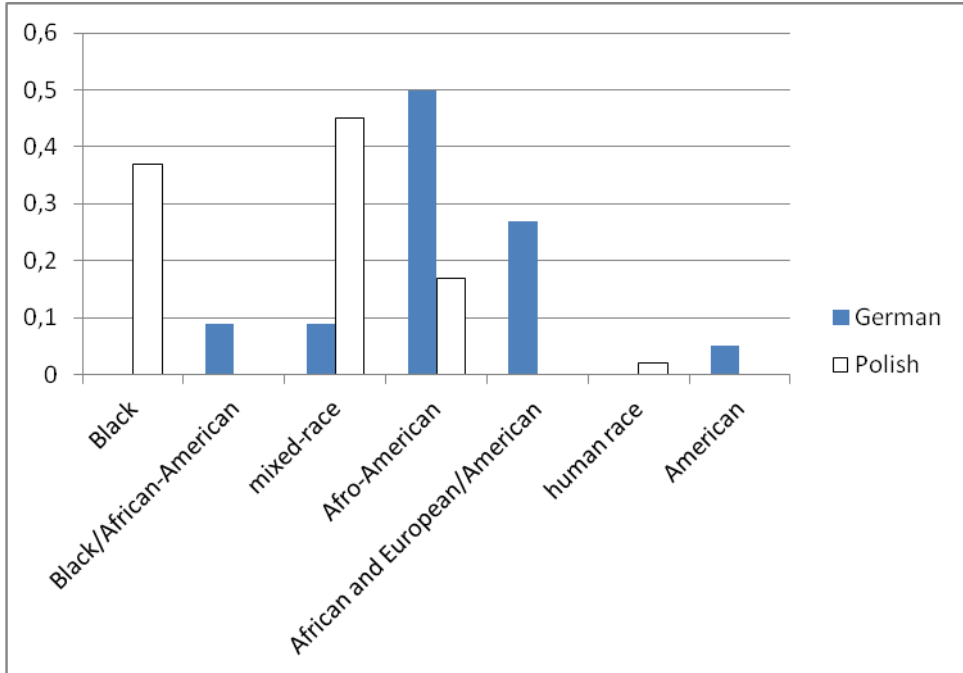
<sup>8</sup> <http://www.sammyboy.com/showthread.php?t=21857> Ilham Anas; retrieved on January 22, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, 1913.

<sup>10</sup>  $df=1$ ;  $\chi^2=5.0$ ;  $p<0.025$ .

<sup>11</sup> Other labels for Polish were: *mulat* “Mulato” (10), *Afroamerykanin* (12), *mieszana* or *czarna/biala* “mixed-race”, “black/white” (3), *Hawajczyk* “Hawaian” (2), *Hindus* “Indian”, *Indoeuropejczyk* “Indoeuropean”, *Hiszpan* “Spaniard”, and *zambezi*. For the Germans, the labels included, next to *schwarz*, *Afro-Amerikaner*, *Mischling*, *Amerikaner*, *Südamerikaner*, *Afrikaner*, *Mexikaner*, *Mitteuropäer*, *Indisch*, *Jamaikanisch*, *Latino*, und *Asiatisch*.

label *czarna* ‘black’ or *Murzyn* ‘Negro’, 45% thought he was mixed-race (*Mulat, biała/czarna, mieszana*), 17% used the label ‘Afro-American’, and the remaining respondent thought that he belonged to the human race. The 22 German respondents who knew about Barack Obama’s biracial descent gave the following responses: 50% Afro-American, 9% Black/African-American, 27% African and European, African and North European or African and North American (9% each), 9% mixed-race (*Mischling*), and the remaining respondent (5%) thought he was of American race.



**Diagram 3. Racial categorisation of Barack Obama by German and Polish respondents.**

Again, the German respondents showed no inclination to use “colored” labels in referring to race and favoured the neutral terms ‘Afro-American’, pertaining to ethnicity, or ‘African’, ‘American’, and ‘European’ pertaining to geography rather than “*Rassenlehre*” (‘science of race’, a term coined by the Nazis). It should be mentioned that although the label ‘Afro-American’ was rarely used among Polish respondents in answering the question on race, it was familiar to them. This was tested by asking them to name Barack Obama’s ethnicity – 65% of the respondents said ‘Afro-American’. All those who answered ‘*I do not know*’ (13%) named Afro-American in the response to the question on his race. The remaining 22% responded that he was of American or African ethnicity. The results confirm the differences in the approach to questions on race, with the tendency of the Germans to speak of categories in ethnic rather than racial terms. At the same time, the Polish respondents differentiated strongly between race and ethnicity. In order to clarify the results, a group of 44 German students were asked whether they found the label *schwarz/Schwarzer* (adjectival and nominal form of ‘black/Black’)

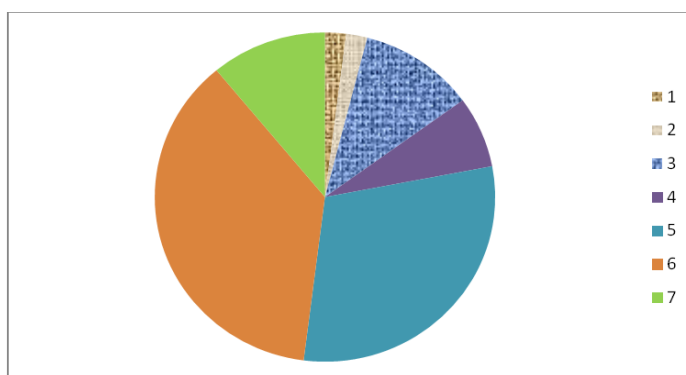
appropriate in referring to Barack Obama. The question was worded: “*Würdest Du Barack Obama als schwarz, bzw. einen Schwarzen bezeichnen?*” (‘Would you call Barack Obama black *adj*, Black *noun*?’) It elicited 37 positive and 7 negative responses. One respondent differentiated between the adjectival form *schwarz* as acceptable, and the nominal form as not acceptable because the latter created a category of people rather than just describing an attribute of an individual. This fits in with the claim by Davis (2001) quoted before, pertaining to the different force of nominal and adjectival references in the processes of the formation of categories and mental colouring. The justifications given by the respondents of their respective choices included factors listed in the table below. Diagram 6 shows the frequencies of the particular types of justifications.

**YES – JUSTIFICATIONS**

- Explanation refers to language use – politically correct, no negative connotations
- Explanation refers to language use – there are few alternatives in German
- Explanation refers to language function – short and clear
- Explanation refers to language use – prevailing usage for dark complexion even if not quite black
- Explanation refers to the usage in the media campaign and/or symbolic function (hope, representative of the Black)
- Explanation refers to complexion, physical appearance
- Explanation refers to African descent
- complexion and descent

**NO – JUSTIFICATIONS**

- Racist connotations
- Incorrect
- Afro-American would be correct
- skin colour is gradable
- social experience different from the majority of the Blacks



**Diagram 4. German respondents’ answers to the question whether Obama should be called *schwarz/Schwarzer* (‘black’, *adj./noun*) and their justifications: NO – 1 social experience, 2 politically incorrect/racist (noun), 3 politically incorrect, YES – 4 prevailing usage, 5 media focus/symbolic function, 6 descent/appearance, 7 politically correct**

Only 37% of all respondents gave answers pertaining to the appearance and descent, and the most gave justifications pertaining to socio-political factors, which is in accord with the German students' evaluation of "race" as being a socio-political category (see next section) as much as a biological one and little differentiation between race and ethnicity for the U.S. context.

It should be noted that this question could hardly be asked of Polish students without changing its sense because of some nuances of expression.<sup>12</sup>

### **7.3 Race as biological vs. socio-political category**

The respondents in Survey 1 were asked whether they thought of race as a biological or socio-political category, with possible answers ranging from 1 (biological), through 2 and 3 (rather biological/rather socio-political), to 4 (socio-political). The average score of the Polish students was 1.5 (between 'biological' and 'rather biological'); for the German students, 2.4 (between 'rather biological' and 'rather socio-political'). This amounts to a considerable difference in attitudes. For the Polish students, the tendency to view race as a purely biological category correlated with the tendency to restrict their categorisation of people on the photos to WYB (Pearson's correlation coefficient = 0.41 – medium positive). In other words, numerous respondents thought that their classification was "biological" while overriding pronounced differences in appearance between people in the photos.

### **7.4 Survey results summarised**

The surveys showed that the German and Polish students differ strongly in their attitudes towards labelling races and their approach to the concept of race. The Poles opted for the "biology" view; the German students were more conscious of the social dimension of race, its sensitive character, and the issues of political correctness. The tendency towards the formation of a minimal number of non-overlapping categories and dichotomised categorisation of biracial people occurred in both populations but was much stronger in Poland.

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<sup>12</sup> In Polish, the adjective most widely used in this context to name the attribute of a person is *czarnoskóry*, "black-skinned" rather than "black". A pilot test showed that most Polish respondents understood the survey question, translated from German into Polish, as a matter of choice between "czarny" and the usual form "czarnoskóry". This interpretation is, of course, quite distant from what the question means in German. On the other hand, translating *black* as *czarnoskóry* would produce a question pertaining strongly to the physical appearance. In other words, this relatively simple question could not be translated from German to Polish without a change of meaning, connotation, the suggested response and its justification.

## 7.5 Knowledge and comprehension of the one-drop rule

As stated above, the most extreme form of markedness assignment and mental colouring of the racial category ‘black’ is the one-drop rule, defining ‘white’ as non-presence of ‘black’ and ‘black’ as any mixture of white and black descent. The following mini-survey consisted of just one target item and aimed at testing whether the one-drop rule had any presence in the actual or potential conceptualisations of race by German and Polish students. Such presence could be constituted either by the awareness of the existence of the rule in the United States, or by the ability to reconstruct it from the premises in cases of its implicit (presuppositional) verbalisations, which would suggest that the same conceptualisation is ready at hand.

The students were asked to translate into their respective languages a short text containing the phrase “*pass as white*”. Taking their level of proficiency into account, it could be expected that they would not have any trouble translating the expression “pass as + NOUN”; the remaining text was also easy to translate.

I applied the test in Poland in two versions differing in the strength of the contextual clues guiding the interpretation; each version had 11 respondents. Both are given below.

(1) *He worked in a car factory. At work, he passed as white for five years.*

(2) *He worked in a car factory. At work, he passed as white for five years but he revealed his identity to a friend.*

In fact, even the addition of more context did not result in any correct responses. 3 Polish respondents failed to offer any response; the remaining 19 produced most surprising guesses, including e.g. (the following is a back-translation from Polish):

*‘He worked illegally (Polish: literally “in black”) for five years.’*

*‘He worked honestly for five years.’*

*‘He worked well for five years.’*

*‘He worked for five years as a white-collar worker.’*

*‘At work, he kept isolating himself for five years ...’*

*‘At work, he was not known for five years ...’*

*‘Although he was white, he managed to stay there for five years.’*

The exercise must have been mind-boggling if just four people translated the phrase *pass as* correctly in the sense of ‘be regarded as’, using one of the Polish equivalents (*był uważany/był uznawany/uchodził za*). The four subject complements (translations of ‘white’) were: ‘clean’, ‘an honest person’, ‘an example’, and ‘a common man’.

It was obvious that the students possessed no knowledge of the one-drop rule; neither were they able to reconstruct the premises (i.e. that being white, or black, is not merely a matter of appearance). When I explained the issue after the test, there was a general murmur of surprise in the class.

In the first run of the experiment, 14 German students correctly translated the phrase, which they received in version (2). Only one of them knew the one-drop-rule from the film “The Human Stain”. One person left the phrase *passed as white* not translated, five translated it diffusely without a reference to whiteness<sup>13</sup> and one got it wrong (*white* → *höher qualifiziert*, ‘higher qualified’).

<sup>13</sup> E.g. *blieb unerkant*, “was not recognized”.

Because the difference between the Poles and the Germans was puzzling, a further survey was conducted in which 24 German students were asked to translate the passage and invent a story where it might appear, in order to find out whether they are actually able to infer the said premises.<sup>14</sup> After the translation task, they were asked whether they had heard of the one-drop rule.

All students translated *white* as ‘weiß/Weißer’ (8/16). One person did not give any useful outline of the story, and four people outlined it in very general terms while indicating that it involved racist or migrant discrimination issues. From the remaining nineteen who gave more detailed responses, twelve persons identified the passage clearly as referring to a person of a light complexion and some African or otherwise non-European ancestors, and six realised that racism was at stake but thought either that the referent actually changed his physical appearance by using make-up or bleaching (four people), or that he was an albino coming from a black or Mexican family (two people). One student thought the referent was a blue-collar worker. Fifteen students located the story in the USA, and one in Germany at the time of national socialism. Only two students had heard of the one-drop rule.

As a whole, the German students showed a much greater ability to re-construe the principle of mental colouring, that is, a greater awareness that being classified as white or not is not just a matter of looks but also of family heritage independent of physical appearance, notwithstanding that it was not shared by all students alike. This general tendency comports with viewing the concept of race as not being mainly an issue of biology, demonstrated by the German students as discussed before (section 7.3).

## 8. References to Barack Obama’s race and ethnicity in the Polish and German media

Table 1 below shows the wording of references to Barack Obama’s race and/or ethnicity in two German and two Polish widely-circulated publications: the tabloids *Bild* (German) and *Super Express* (Polish), the broadsheet *Frankfurter Rundschau* (German) and the weekly *Polityka* (Polish). The figures pertain to the online versions of the publications in the period from February through December 2008 for *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Polityka*, and *Super Express*, and the December 2008 through March 2009 for *Bild*. The selection was based on the availability of the articles from the respective periods in the online archives.

The interlingual comparison between *Frankfurter Rundschau* and *Bild* shows that 85% and 80%, respectively, of relevant references involved a “colour” or ethnic term. At the same time, the nominal form of reference, *Schwarzer*, was much more frequent in the tabloid – which is known for its right-wing approach to the social issues such as migration and minorities. This fits in with Brekhus’ (1996: 508) contention that there is a “non-trivial” difference between adjectives and nouns, and that nominal references are

<sup>14</sup> One motivation for repeating the test was a comment of the translation teacher in the German course where it was conducted, who spoke of the students’ tendency to “translate just as it stands there, no matter whether it makes sense, which, in this case, may have produced correct results just by chance”.

more strongly affiliated with emphasizing difference, as well as with reinforcing pejorative connotations if there are any to start from. A further interlingual difference was observed in the more frequent use of ‘Afro-American’ (as an adjective or a noun) in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and much lesser use of the adjective and the noun *farbig/Farbiger*. The use of *farbig*, both as an adjective and a noun, is regarded as pejorative by some (but not all) speakers of German; resented by the Blacks in Germany and acknowledged as being discriminatory by researchers on racism (cf. Noah Sow in an interview given to *Franfurter Rundschau*).<sup>15</sup>

In Polish, the broadsheet used the adjectives *czarny* and *czarnoskóry* (“black-skinned”) with roughly similar frequency, while *Super Express* opted for *czarnoskóry* with just 2 exceptions (*czarny* and *Afroamerykanin*) among 50 references. No conclusions, though, can be drawn about the ideological value of these preferences because none of the two sources shows a distinguished profile as far as the racial or minority issues are concerned. The usage of the noun *Afroamerykanin* and the corresponding adjective was very low in both sources.

GERMAN			POLISH		
	Frankfurter Rundschau	Bild		Polityka	Super Expres
	[951]	[1312]		[87]	[233]
schwarz (adjective, 74% black)		51%	czarny	33%	2%
Schwarzer (noun, Black)	10%	19%			
“schwarzer Kennedy”, JFK	1%	13%	„czarny Kennedy”, JFK	12%	4%
schwarzhäutiger Kennedy, JFK	0%	0%	czarnoskóry Kennedy, JFK	16%	0%
halb schwarz	0%	0%	na wpół czarny	2%	0%
Afro-amerikanisch, afroamerikanisch	5%	2%	afroamerykański	0%	0%

<sup>15</sup> Published online on October 17, 2008,

[http://www.fr-online.de/in\\_und\\_ausland/politik/aktuell/?em\\_cnt=1614568&](http://www.fr-online.de/in_und_ausland/politik/aktuell/?em_cnt=1614568&); retrieved on January 22, 2010.

	GERMAN		POLISH		
	Frankfurter Rundschau	Bild		Polityka Super Expres	
	[951]	[1312]		[87]	[233]
Afro-Amerikaner, Afroamerikaner	7%	3%	Afroamerykanin	2%	2%
farbig (adjective, 1% coloured)		8%	kolorowy	0%	0%
Farbiger (noun, 1% coloured)		3%			
dunkelhäutig (dark-0% skinned)		1%	ciemnoskóry	0%	0%
schwarzhäutig (black-0% skinned)		0%	czarnoskóry	31%	92%
mit dunkler Hautfarbe	0%	2%	o ciemnej skórze	0%	0%
Mulate (mulatto)	0%		Mulat	2%	0%
Total	224	240		49	52

**Table 1. Language use in references to Barack Obama's race/ethnicity in selected Polish and German dailies and periodicals (online versions). The figures in square brackets refer to the number of articles in which Barack Obama is mentioned.**

The table shows that referring to the President as 'black' in German and either 'black' or 'black-skinned' in Polish was the prevailing practice in both countries, especially in Poland. The terms *mulat*, *Mischling*, or expressions meaning 'black and white' were hardly used or not used at all, although they were applied to him in the earlier quoted surveys. This was to be expected because the news in both countries were based on U.S. media sources, from which they were translated, and reproduced the linguistic practice as well as categorisations and attributions represented in the latter.

However, this seemingly unproblematic practice became a debated issue, even if the debate was never at the centre of public attention. It was led with engagement in the shadow of the news reports on the presidential campaign by people similarly opposing racial discrimination but representing contrary attitudes towards the linguistic/classificatory issue.



The controversy and the argumentation for and against the continued mentally-coloured language use (in which people of white-and-black descent are, simply, black) has an old history. This does not imply that this history is known to the ever-changing participants in the discussion, who may be re-inventing the relevant argumentation for themselves when they become interested in the problem.

The following recapitulation clarifies the basic nature of the contention. Then, examples are given from the discussion ignited by Barack Obama's campaign. Proponents of non-racist language use in the United States or other countries basically draw their frameworks from the two approaches outlined below.

## 9. Discussions on the dichotomising language use in the media

In a nutshell, the antiracist attitudes towards dichotomising language use boil down to the following two options. The first group thinks it should be opposed as it is unjust. The other group believes that it is wrong to oppose it because this only severs discrimination. Both supporters and opponents of the dichotomizing language use are similarly concerned about discrimination, and frequently view the practices different from their own as being discriminatory.

Those who think that the rule should be opposed have one principal argument – they argue that the asymmetry in the criteria used for distributing blackness and whiteness clearly implies their unequal status, and any asymmetry is discriminatory in itself.

The following is a summary of arguments used by those who think that the dichotomy should be continually used, extracted from Davis (2001):

- Opposing it amounts to the degree of discrimination becoming dependent on the degree of a person's visible or hereditary blackness<sup>16</sup>.
- A graded re-classification (more/less black) ignores the historical continuity of the experience of discrimination and opposition against it.
- Opposing the rule would undermine the solidarity of the oppressed.
- Re-classification would exclude many historical personalities, symbols of "black pride", from the very category they fought (or have been fighting) for.
- The classification reflects self-identification of racially mixed people with the Black community and is a matter of personal freedom.

The following quotations from the electronic and electronically re-produced printed media illustrate some of the above-listed arguments, and show the paradox of basically the same intention producing contrary guidelines regarding the ethically right language use. The quotations show how the same motives and arguments cut through various countries, as well as simple-minded and more sophisticated levels of reflection.

### **iii. Obama is not black**

BETTINA STEINER (*Die Presse*)

*Well, in the first place here is a correction: There will be no black President in the White House! I mean, not in the following few years, this I happen to know from the horse's*

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. also „colorism“, Walker 1983.

*mouth. It is not the case that I have received a secret report from the new James Bond. I also do not worry about an armed coup. It is just that Barack Obama is not exactly black! Or, to be exact, if we claim that he is black, we could as well call him white. He has a white mother and black father. But we do not care about the white part. White, as it seems, means – pure white.*

*Does this already mean racism?*

*No idea. I have no answer.<sup>17</sup>*

While Bettina Steiner notes the asymmetry, but is inconclusive about its interpretation as an expression of tainted perception and discriminatory attitude, the following quotation comes from a Polish online discussion forum on current political affairs and represents a firm stand on the issue:

**iv. Obama – the first black U.S. President**

*Obama is not black. Obama is black white. He is a mulatto 50/50.<sup>18</sup>*

**v. Re: To be precise**

*Which Negro? What black? He has a white mother and a black father. Which means that he is half white.<sup>19</sup>*

These quotations from German and Polish may arouse the impression that what is at stake here is mixing up the meaning of the German word *schwarz/Schwarzer* and, even more so, the Polish words *czarny/czarnoskóry*, which refer to physical appearance, with *Black* as it is used in the American media – as a reference to ethnicity and a political group of interest. The latter reference is connected to the referent's self-identification as much as his or her life experience, as indicated by the famous headline “*Is he Black enough?*”<sup>20</sup> in a article considering his being worthy of Black support, with a view to

<sup>17</sup> **iii. Obama ist nicht schwarz**

*Also zunächst einmal eine Korrektur: Es wird auch weiterhin keinen schwarzen Präsidenten im Weißen Haus geben! Jedenfalls nicht in den nächsten Jahren, das weiß ich zufällig aus erster Hand. Nicht, dass mir der neue James Bond geheime Informationen zugetragen hätte. Ich befürchte auch keinen bewaffneten Putsch. Es ist nur so: Barack Obama ist eigentlich gar nicht schwarz! Oder besser: Wenn wir behaupten, er sei schwarz, dann können wir ihn mit dem gleichen Recht einen Weißen nennen. Er hat eine weiße Mutter und einen schwarzen Vater. Aber der weiße Anteil ist uns wurscht. Weiß, das bedeutet offenbar reinweiß. Ob das schon rassistisch ist? Keine Ahnung. Kann ich nicht beantworten.*

<sup>18</sup> 05.11.08, 06:33 [http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,902,86819882,86820051,Obama\\_pierwszy\\_czarny\\_prezydent\\_USA.html](http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,902,86819882,86820051,Obama_pierwszy_czarny_prezydent_USA.html)

**iv. Obama - pierwszy czarny prezydent USA**

*Obama nie jest czarny. Obama jest czarny biały. Obama jest mulatem 50/50.*

05.11.08, 06:33 [http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,902,86819882,86820051,Obama\\_pierwszy\\_czarny\\_prezydent\\_USA.html](http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,902,86819882,86820051,Obama_pierwszy_czarny_prezydent_USA.html)

<sup>19</sup> 05.11.08, 08:25 [http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,902,86819882,Obama\\_pierwszy\\_czarny\\_prezydent\\_USA.html?v=2v](http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,902,86819882,Obama_pierwszy_czarny_prezydent_USA.html?v=2v).

**Re: W kwestii formalnej**

*Jaki murzyn? Jaki czarnoskóry? Przecież on ma białą matkę i czarnego ojca. Czyli jest w połowie biały.*

<sup>20</sup> Michael Fauntroy in *The Huffington Post*, January 30, 2007, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-fauntroy-phd/is-he-black-enough\\_b\\_40048.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-fauntroy-phd/is-he-black-enough_b_40048.html)

these both aspects of the presidential candidate during the campaign. (The article was definitely not concerned with Barack Obama's looks, and it would have been most shocking if this had been the case, regarding, among other things, that many prominent activists of the Black movement are of black and white heritage.) In this interpretation, the doubts and dislikes regarding the correctness of the attribution would melt down to cultural-linguistic ignorance, i.e. not knowing the intension of the words *black/Black* in American English, which actually mean "Afro-American", and which *schwarz* and *czarny* are merely literal translations of. (See e.g. quotation X below in which *black* and *Afro-American* are treated as strictly synonymous in AE).

Viewed from this perspective, the controversy stems from the lack of a suitable German and Polish translation equivalent as a result of the non-existence of the phenomenon itself, i.e., an ethnic group of people of African origin, who share a common historical experience spanning several generations and have worked out their own distinguished culture, including lifestyle, institutions, and varieties of language. In contrast, Afro-Germans are first- or second-generation immigrants, come from many different parts of Africa, identify themselves mainly with particular African ethnic groups, speak different languages at home and have no common historical heritage apart from the post-colonial experience, which is culturally and linguistically diversified, plus the very recent individual experience of migration. This, obviously, is not enough to form an ethnicity.<sup>21</sup> In Poland, black and biracial people are few in number and, like in Germany, do not form an ethnic group.

However, such a rendering of the issue as a linguistic misunderstanding is largely invalidated by the occurrence of the same sentiments and interpretations based on the asymmetry argument in the United States, illustrated by the following quotations coming, respectively, from a non-expert and a writer on racial issues:

*'vi. Yahoo!answers*

***If someone is half white/half black, what race do they belong to?***

*Barrack Hussein Obama is listed as "the Black Senator" from Illinois, but his mother was white. He is just as much white as he is black.....are the people who call him black being racist, because they see the color of his skin first?*

***Best answer – chosen by Asker***

*It is a throwback to the bad, old days when they used to claim that if someone has so much as a drop of black blood, they were black. Yes, I think it's racist, but it's become so widely accepted that I think people have forgotten about that - until someone like you poses the question.*

*Wouldn't it be nice if we didn't think in those terms at all? <sup>22</sup>*

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that first- and second-generation Afro-German teenagers have already started to vigorously produce an ethnicity based on their shared African roots. A cultural practice unique to them is, in the year 2010, the so-called jerk dance, performed in the streets and public buildings and initiated by Black teenagers in Los Angeles. Jerk dance groups in Germany, publishing their dance videos on Youtube, consist exclusively of youth of some African heritage. I observed that other wanna-bes are excluded from participation even if there are family ties at stake, in patchwork families such as my own.

<sup>22</sup> <http://ca.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20061109182215AALPv4E>. Both comments came from people writing in the U.S..

While reasoning from the “asymmetry” argument is rather tentative here, the U.S. writer Marie Arana takes a clear stance. The author is a Peruvian-born U.S. citizen and the author of the autobiographical book *America Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood*.

**‘vii. He’s Not Black**

*By Marie Arana, The Washington Post*<sup>23</sup>

*He is also half white.*

*Unless the one-drop rule still applies, our president-elect is not black.*

*We call him that -- he calls himself that -- because we use dated language and logic. After more than 300 years and much difficult history, we hew to the old racist rule: Part-black is all black. Fifty percent equals a hundred. There’s no in-between.*

*That was my reaction when I read these words on the front page of this newspaper the day after the election: "Obama Makes History: U.S. Decisively Elects First Black President."*

*The phrase was repeated in much the same form by one media organization after another. It’s as if we have one foot in the future and another still mired in the Old South. We are racially sophisticated enough to elect a non-white president, and we are so racially backward that we insist on calling him black. Progress has outpaced vocabulary.*

*To me, as to increasing numbers of mixed-race people, Barack Obama is not our first black president. He is our first biracial, bicultural president. He is more than the personification of African American achievement. He is a bridge between races, a living symbol of tolerance, a signal that strict racial categories must go.’*

Marie Arana sees the use of dichotomising “colour” labels as rooted in ways of perception formed by the tradition of racist oppression, “racially backward” and “mired in the Old South”. The language used is strongly evaluative and does not leave any doubts about whom she sides with. Her stance has been opposed by direct responses to this contribution, illustrating two of the above-listed counter-arguments to symmetry: experience (viii, ix) and choice (ix, x).

**‘viii. (...)** *Yes, Barack Obama is our first African American president. Why, because he identifies himself as such. His experiences and details have been much what many blacks have endured in regards to racism and bigotry. If he was pulled over by the police (before running for president) I am sure he was profiled just like any other black male. I’m sure the police could give beans about his fifty-percent white heritage. Is it right, absolutely not but again this is the real world. I understand what your article was trying to say but I disagree with how you say it. President-elect Obama is definitely black, because that is how he has lived his life. (...)*<sup>24</sup>

**ix.** *Well, if Barack isn’t Black, since I am brown skinned, since my both parents have grandparents of white descent, I too should be considered biracial. Along with many black people in the Western hemisphere. The problem with accepting that bi-racial thing is figuring out where do you draw the line. The fact is many people of African descent have non-black ancestry and believe me no one stops to ask us what we are mixed with. Mixing is not a new phenomenon and I might add that as a West Indian, my great-grandfather (a man of mixed descent) married a white woman. I’m sorry but I am a mixed*

<sup>23</sup> Sunday, November 30, 2008; B01,

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/28/AR2008112802219.html>

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/28/AR2008112802219\\_Comments.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/28/AR2008112802219_Comments.html)

*heritage woman that have no qualms calling myself a Black woman. No one should be imposing their views on what I consider myself and the same should be done for Obama. (...)*<sup>25</sup>

**x. He's Black, Get Over It**

*I know, it's hard to believe, but some people are still having trouble with it. (...) If identifying biracial people as black "validates the separation of the races" then there is perhaps no one contributing more to the cause of these neo-segregationists than Barack Obama himself. "My view has always been that I'm African-American," Obama told Chicago Tribune reporter Dawn Turner Trice back in 2004. "African Americans by definition, we're a hybrid people." In seeking a validation of her own ideas about race and racial identity, and by casting Obama as the victim of a reductive racial vocabulary, Arenas simply ignores the will of her subject. But racial categories are only unjust insofar as they prevent people from identifying how they wish. Arenas is doing exactly what she is attempting to prevent, forcing Obama into the racial category of her, rather than his own, choosing.*<sup>26</sup>

The ironic formulation "get over it" in (x) does not only sound strongly adversary and accusatory of those to whom the directive is addressed but also implies a shock and regret on their part. The people who disclaim Barack Obama as being "simply" black are rendered rather contemptuously as "still having trouble with it", and thus represented as being on the wrong side of the barricade – fighting for a lost and erroneous cause.

In Germany, an even stronger polemic supportive of the term 'Schwarz/er' in references to Barack Obama and other biracial people has been offered by a renowned expert on the racial issue, Noah Sow, in an interview for *Frankfurter Rundschau*. However, it needs to be emphasized that this happened as a criticism of the alternative term *Farbig* ('coloured'), and that Sow denies any reality to the notion of race apart from political reality. The argument from choice is accompanied by pointing out the semantic-political dimension of the term *Schwarzer* (taken to be an equivalent of *Black*), i.e. defining it as referring simply to a political group of interest rather than some biological attribute (the term is to be spelled with a capital letter in English to distinguish it from references to complexion). Besides, racism and the proximity to Nazi ideology are attributed to adherents of different linguistic practices:

*'xi. FR: How would you explain the fact that some people are reluctant to use the politically correct term "Schwarzer"?'*

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.jackandjillpolitics.com/2008/12/hes-black-get-over-it/>

*NS: Because they still have some of the Rassenlehre in their heads. And because they do not know that "Schwarz" is a political concept. Or they think that they do not need to respect the right of the black people to name themselves.*<sup>27</sup>

Yet, the most widely circulated German discussion on this issue took place in the printed edition of the tabloid *BILD am SONNTAG* with a readership estimated at 10.5 million, and reprinted in the online edition of *Bild*. It consisted of a reader's letter to the editor in chief, Claus Strunz, and the editor's answer.

**'xii. Why do you call Barack Obama "black", Mister Strunz?**

**Dear Mr. Strunz,**

*Barack Obama has been repeatedly referred to in the German newspapers as a black candidate for presidency. Obama is, however, not black but coloured. His mother is a White from Kansas, his father is a Black from Kenya.*

*Maybe you should, Mr. Strunz, make your journalists aware of this difference, even though it may be difficult for some of them to distance themselves from stereotypical pictures of America, such as racism, because a black U.S. President suits polemic argumentation better than a (merely) coloured president, which Obama – if he becomes one – is going to be.*

*With best wishes*

*Jürgen Rosenfeld, California (USA)*<sup>28</sup>

**xiii. Dear Jürgen Rosenfeld,**

*Thank you for your letter to me about how to correctly refer to Barack Obama. Is he, as repeatedly written in BILD am SONNTAG, a "black presidential candidate", a "coloured" or an "Afro-American"?*

*Correct ethnic references change. As recently as several decades ago one did not hesitate to use the word "Neger" (Lain niger=black) for people of dark skin colour.*

<sup>27</sup> Frankfurter Rundschau, 17 October 2008, [http://www.fr-online.de/in\\_und\\_ausland/politik/aktuell/?em\\_cnt=1614568&](http://www.fr-online.de/in_und_ausland/politik/aktuell/?em_cnt=1614568&), retrieved on January 22, 2010.

*FR: Wie erklären Sie sich, dass manche Leute sich scheuen, die korrekte Bezeichnung "Schwarzer" zu benutzen?*

*NS: Weil sie wohl noch nicht ganz die Rassenlehre aus ihrem Kopf haben. Und nicht wissen, dass "Schwarz" ein politischer Begriff ist. Oder finden, dass sie das Selbstbenennungsrecht Schwarzer Menschen nicht beachten müssen.*

*(Author's comment): "Rassenlehre" - "race science", the Nazi teachings of the hierarchy of the races*

<sup>28</sup> Bild am Sonntag, 5. 7. 2008.

**xii. Der Chefredakteur antwortet Warum nennen Sie Obama „schwarz“, Herr Strunz?**

Lieber Herr Strunz,

*Barack Obama wird in den deutschen Zeitungen wiederholt als **schwarzer** Präsidentschaftskandidat bezeichnet. Obama ist aber kein Schwarzer, sondern ein Farbiger. Seine Mutter, eine Weiße aus Kansas, sein Vater, ein Schwarzer aus Kenia.*

*Vielleicht sollten Sie, Herr Strunz, Ihre Redakteure einmal auf diesen Unterschied hinweisen, wenngleich es manchem Redakteur auch schwerfallen mag, sich von allgemeinen Klischees über Amerika, wie etwa dem des Rassismus, zu trennen, weil eben ein schwarzer US-Präsident besser zum polemischen Argumentieren passt als (nur) ein farbiger Präsident, der Obama – wenn er es werden würde – nun einmal ist.*

*Mit freundlichen Grüßen*

*Jürgen Rosenfeld, California (USA)*

*Hans J. Massaquoi, who grew up in the Third Reich – his mother came from Hamburg, his father from Liberia – gave his highly-recommended memoirs published in 1999 the title “Neger, Neger, Schornsteinfeger”, because he frequently had to hear this children’s rhyme.*

*Today, the word “Neger” is regarded as being taboo, probably because it sounds too much like the discriminating word “Nigger”. Therefore, the Berlin CDU-politician Frank Steffel was rightly condemned for insensitive language use after he used the word in 2001. Politically correct, but also inconvenient for everyday use, is the word “Afro-American” to refer to a U.S. citizen whose parents or parent stem from Africa. The analogical word “Afrogerman” has not gained currency. I find it clumsy.*

*The word you prefer, Coloured, is certainly not false but, to be precise, it also includes other parts of the population, such as the Indians or Hindu, therefore it lacks precision.*

*A short time ago the son of the U.S. civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was asked by a journalist from “Stern”: “Why is someone who has a white mother and a black father automatically black?” Martin Luther King III’s response was: “This goes back to a definition developed once by the Europeans. When you have just a drop of black blood, you are black. I think that people look at Obama and believe that he looks black. Even if he looked somewhat whiter than he does, he would still be regarded as Black.” Have I convinced you?*

*BILD am SONNTAG sticks to the expression “Black” (noun) in references to the presidential candidate of the Democrats also because “black” is what he calls himself, as with many other Afroamericans.*

*You certainly do not want to claim that Mr. Obama discriminates against himself, dear Jürgen Rosenfeld.*

*BILD am SONNTAG‘<sup>29</sup>*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

**xiii. Lieber Jürgen Rosenfeld,**

*herzlichen Dank für Ihr Schreiben an mich, wie man Barack Obama korrekt bezeichnet. Ist er, wie wir in BILD am SONNTAG am mehrfach geschrieben haben, ein „schwarzer Präsidentschaftskandidat“, ein „farbiger“ oder „Afroamerikanischer“?*

*Die korrekten ethnischen Bezeichnungen wandeln sich. Noch vor einigen Jahrzehnten wurde ganz ohne Arg der aus dem 17. Jahrhundert stammende Begriff „Neger“ (lateinisch niger = schwarz für einen dunkelhäutigen Menschen verwendet.*

*Der im Dritten Reich aufgewachsene Hans J. Massaquoi – Mutter Hamburgerin, Vater Liberianer – gab seinen 1999 erschienenen lesenswerten Memoiren den Titel „Neger, Neger, Schornsteinfeger“, weil er als kleiner Junge diesen Kinderreim oft zu hören bekam.*

*Heute gilt das Wort Neger als tabu, weil es wohl zu sehr an das diskriminierende Wort „Nigger“ erinnert. Zu Recht wurde dem Berliner CDU-Politiker Frank Steffel unsensibler Sprachgebrauch vorgeworfen, als er 2001 das Wort „Neger“ verwendete.*

*Politisch korrekt aber auch umständlich für den Alltagsgebrauch ist die Bezeichnung „Afroamerikaner“ für einen US-Bürger, dessen Eltern bzw. ein Elternteil aus Afrika stammt. Der analoge Begriff Afrodeutscher hat sich bisher nicht durchgesetzt. Ich empfinde ihn als verkrampft. Die von Ihnen favorisierte Bezeichnung „Farbiger“ ist sicherlich nicht falsch, doch umfasst er streng genommen weitere Bevölkerungsgruppen wie zum Beispiel die Indianer oder Inder, ist also unpräzise.*

*Kürzlich wurde der Sohn des vor 40 Jahren ermordeten US-Bürgerrechtlers Martin Luther King von einem „Stern“-Reporter gefragt: „Warum ist einer, der eine weiße Mutter und einen schwarzen Vater hat, automatisch black?“ Die Antwort von Martin Luther King III.: „Das geht zurück auf eine Definition, die die Europäer mal entwickelten. Wenn du nur einen Tropfen schwarzen Bluts in dir hast, bist du Schwarzer. Ich glaube, Leute schauen sich Obama an und*

The reader, Jürgen Rosenfeld, proposes that Barack Obama be called *farbig* or *Farbiger* ('coloured' *adj.*, 'Coloured' *noun*) because he isn't black. The arguments named by the editor in chief, Claus Strunz, defending the label *Schwarzer* ('Black') for Barack Obama are:

- the label 'coloured' is not bad, but it is imprecise, as it also includes other minorities such as American Indians,
- the label 'black' corresponds to the current language use,
- the current use of this language has been confirmed recently in a published interview with the son of Martin Luther King Jr. (Martin Luther King III is quoted as saying that this categorisation was developed once by Europeans),
- Barack Obama refers to himself as being Black – and he would certainly not want to discriminate against himself.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever Jürgen Rosenfeld's motivation was in writing his letter to the editor (his use of *farbig*, regarded as derogatory by Sow and African migrants in Germany, may arouse doubts regarding the cause he represents), what is of interest here is the editor's answer, voicing the view that self-reference conforming to the one-drop-rule is based on choice.

The argument from choice, represented also in the earlier-quoted responses to the contribution by Marie Arana in (viii), (ix), and (x), is rejected e.g. by Davis (2001: 5), who states laconically: "*Blacks had no other choice.*" Similarly, Brekhus (1996) points out the lack of real choice in self-identification because for members of the marked category self-identification is guided by definition they received from others; any self-categorisation must be socially legitimised in order to become capable of being effectively used in communication ("*Communication requires that speakers should base their interactions on validity claims that are acceptable to their fellows*", Agozino 2003: 104). However, as illustrated above, the argument reappears in the public debate in both Germany and the United States.

Another group of arguments in favour of the "biracial-black" are arguments from black pride, as illustrated by the following exchange on a Polish discussion forum on African affairs:

*'xiv. Afraid?! (=pun "Obama" <> "Obawa", Polish: fear)*  
*Obama, that is to say President Obama, is a historical personage now. But ... everybody calls him "black", "black-skinned" or (a word I detest) "Negro". Why? He is as black as he is white. As far as the membership in the unjust racial division, he is a Mulatto. That is, every White can say he represents us. Every Black can feel represented by him. At this point, we should ask ourselves whether the artificially imposed division into races makes any sense at all. (...) For many people "black" is a synonym of "worse". Fortunately, this*

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*halten sein Aussehen für das eines Schwarzen. Selbst wenn er noch etwas weißer wäre, würde er als Schwarzer gelten" Überzeugt?*

*BILD am SONNTAG bleibt auch deshalb bei dem Ausdruck „Schwarzer“ für den Präsidentschaftskandidaten der Demokraten, weil Barack Obama sich wie viele Afroamerikaner selbst als „black“ bezeichnet.*

*Dass Mr. Obama sich selbst diskriminiert, wollen Sie, lieber Jürgen Rosenfeld, doch sicher nicht unterstellen.*

<sup>30</sup> Claus Strunz's response is actually based on at least one false premise (causal explanation by a celebrity being equalled with rationalisation and justification); this issue cannot be pursued here.



website shows that there is only one word – “human”, without division into “colors”. (...) Ifunanya<sup>31</sup>

**xv. Obama is a black man**

*I regret to say this Inunanya, but in this case most of my black friends would accuse you of typically “whitey” thinking, because of your attempt to take away the achievements of the black U.S. President by denying his “blackness”. They would say you regarded him to be “black” as a candidate, but now as president you want him “white”, or at least “not black”. I know this is not what you meant, and probably I also should not comment on this for my friends (because this is also an indiscretion of sorts), but the relations between the races are as they are. I would refrain from saying that Obama is not (only) a black man. He is a pride (and well deserved for sure) of all black people in the world. It’s like claiming after the election of JP II for the Pope that he was not quite Polish (but, rather, a Mountaineer, or more of a Catholic – it is harder to find a reason, but let’s imagine there is one). The Poles would tear your head off ☺. Maybe JP II is not the best example – possibly Maria Skłodowska-Curie and the contention about her being Polish would be better – but only this example arouses comparable emotions.*

*It is interesting how sensitive and deceptive any discussion becomes when skin colour is in any way concerned. This always makes the topic heavy, because it touches upon a sensibility and loyalty to the group which is closer, in one way or another, to one’s own ego. In a way, it seems that we are all “fanclub members” by nature, to a greater or lesser degree.*

*Marcin\_emi<sup>32</sup>*

<sup>31</sup> 06-11-2008, <http://afryka.org/?showNewsPlus=3352>

**xiv. Obawa?!**

*Obama, a raczej prezydent Obama, jest w tym momencie osoba historyczna. Ale... Każdy mówi o nim “czarny”, “czarnoskóry” czy (tak nie lubiane przeze mnie słowo) “Murzyn”. Dlaczego? Jest tak samo czarny, jak biały. Pod względem “przynależności” do niesprawiedliwego podziału na rasy: jest mulattem. Czyli każdy biały może powiedzieć, że to nas reprezentuje. Każdy czarny, że jest ich przedstawicielem. W tym momencie należałoby się zastanowić czy sztucznie narzucony “podział” na rasy ma jakikolwiek sens? (...) Dla wielu ludzi “czarny” jest synonimem słowa “gorszy”. Na szczęście ten portal pokazuje, że istnieje tylko słowo “człowiek”, nie dzielnik na “kolory” (...)*

*Ifunanya*

<sup>32</sup> 07-11-2008, <http://afryka.org/?showNewsPlus=3352>, retrieved on January 22, 2010.

**xv. Obama jest czarnym człowiekiem**

*Przykro mi Ifunanya, ale w tym przypadku większość moich czarnoskórych znajomych zarzuciła by Ci typowo ‘białaskie’ myślenie. Za próbę odbierania zasług i osiągnięć czarnoskórego prezydenta USA przez negowanie jego ‘czarności’. Powiedzieli by, że, wg Ciebie, w jako kandydat on był ‘czarnoskóry’, a teraz chcesz, by jako prezydent był ‘biały’, albo przynajmniej ‘nie czarny’. Wiem, że nie o to Ci chodziło, i wiem, że pewnie nie powinienem nawet tego komentować za moich znajomych (bo to też jest w sumie pewnego rodzaju nietakt), ale specyfika relacji między rasami jest taka, a nie inna. Dlatego wystrzegalbym się stwierdzenia (teraz), że Barack Obama nie jest przecież tylko czarnym człowiekiem. On jest dumą (zasłużoną w każdym calu) czarnoskórych na całym świecie. To jest tak, jakbyś stwierdził po wyborze papieża JP II, że nie jest on całkiem Polakiem (tylko np Górale, albo bardziej katolikiem, niż Polakiem - w tym przypadku ciężiej znaleźć powód, ale wyobraźmy sobie, że taki istnieje). Polacy by Ci chyba głowę urwali :). Może JP II nie jest tutaj dobrym przykładem (np. lepszym byłaby Maria Skłodowska-Curie i spór o jej polskość) ale jedynie ten przykład wiąże ze sobą porównywalny poziom emocji.*

These two texts illustrate again how both the supporters and opponents of dichotomising language use are similarly concerned about discrimination and view the advocates of practices different from their own as supporters of unfair treatment. In (xv), the apparent “injustice” inherent in the asymmetrical treatment is rendered fully irrelevant in view of the factual social inequality of the races, which is to some extent outbalanced by the categorisation of a prominent personage as a member of the “weaker” party. At the same time, similarly as in (x), insisting on the “statistical” 50/50 view is interpreted as an act of envy and unwillingness to admit any bit of success to the under-privileged minority. The argument in (xv) takes its force from emphasizing the right of the oppressed minority to claim an achievement, and can only be convincingly opposed by someone claiming the same from a different angle. Such a claim occurs in (xvi) which is a response to (xv):

*'xvi. Show your friends Obama's photos from his childhood – a white mom and an absent dad. Blackness vanishes somehow, doesn't it?  
Marcin\_emi – your friends may feel annoyed because calling Obama a Mulatto is disclaiming the Black achievement and negating his origins, but calling him black negates all the hard work which his mother put into his upbringing – it is like claiming she had never been there. As a black man's woman I refuse to cooperate on that. My children will be just as white as they will be black, and just as Polish as Zimbabweish ...'*<sup>33</sup>

## 10. Conclusion

The surveys testing the language use and social perception of people of white and black descent among the German and Polish youths revealed a tendency towards mental colouring in which ‘black’ is the marked part of the spectrum in both communities. This tendency was stronger in the Poles due to their relatively strong adherence to the classical categorisation of races into a few categories, which many respondents treated as non-overlapping. At the same time, the surveys proved that the German youths were much more conscious of the sensitive socio-political nature of racial classification and understood race as being a socio-political and biological category to equal degree. They distanced themselves from the historical classifications of the human race into “races” in

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*Swoją drogą to interesującym jest to, jak bardzo delikatna i obfitująca w zasadzki staje się dyskusja na temat czegokolwiek co dotyczy koloru skóry człowieka. To zawsze czyni temat ciężkim, bo dotyka wrażliwości i wrodzonego poczucia przynależności i lojalności wobec grupy bardziej zbliżonej (na różne sposoby) do własnego 'ja' każdego z nas. Wychodzi na to, że z natury jesteśmy w mniejszym lub większym stopniu 'kibolami'. (:)*

*Marcin\_emi*

<sup>33</sup> 07-11-2008, <http://afryka.org/?showNewsPlus=3352>, retrieved on January 22, 2010

*xvi. Pokaż swoim znajomym zdjęcie Obamy z okresu dorastania - biała mama i nieobecny tatuś. Jakoś ta czarność chyba zanika?*

*Marcin\_emi - może i Twój znajomi się burzą, ze nazywając Obamę Mulatem odbiera się osiągnięcia Murzynów i neguje jego pochodzenie, ale nazywając go czarnym neguje się całą ciężką pracę, jaką włożyła jego matka w jego wychowanie - to tak, jakby powiedzieć, że jej nigdy nie było. Jako kobieta czarnego faceta odmawiam współpracy. Moje dzieci będą tak samo białe jak i czarne i tak samo polskie jak i zimbabwejskie...*

favour of attributions emphasizing geographic diversity of human appearance. The Poles treated race prevalingly as a biological notion carrying only a slight socio-political aspect. This was consistent with the respondents' inability to reconstruct the one-drop rule (the premise that being white is not merely a matter of looks) in a translation task, as well as with the prevailing tendency to translate *black* as *czarnoskóry* ('black-skinned'), referring unanimously to appearance, in the Polish press.

The most interesting conclusion that could be drawn from the observation of the public debate about "biracial=black" led in the press and online media in the United States, Germany, and Poland showed that, paradoxically, the proponents and opponents of applying mentally-coloured language when referring to people of black and white descent regard linguistic choices different from their own as symptomatic of explicit or hidden racism. This demonstrates that whichever solution is chosen in speaking about them, in particular by those who are unlikely victims of racial discrimination, it will have a considerable potential for sparking accusations of racism. In other words, a tendency to produce controversies and moral evaluations pertaining to any sort of language use is inherent in the subject matter, and no way of speaking is considered free of suspicion when value-laden issues such as racial categorisation and discrimination are at stake.

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