

## Critical Discourse Analysis in The Song “They Don’t Care About Us” By Michael Jackson

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to (1) analyze Michael Jackson's song "They Don't Care About Us" using Fairclough's CDA model, which includes description, interpretation, and explanation, and (2) explore its implications for language learning. The data, comprising song lyrics and symbolic cues from the video, were evaluated using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis. The description analysis reveals that the repeated line "All I want to say is that they don't really care about us" emphasizes his main message of institutional indifference to social inequality. While interpretation analysis shows that the song's background is linked to the social and political unrest of 1995, referencing events like the Rodney King beating and the subsequent riots. From the perspective of explanation, the song acts as a protest, using music to raise awareness of social issues and call for change. The song includes a variety of grammar and vocabulary, from everyday terms to complex words, helping language learners in expanding their vocabulary. Thus, this song can be used in literary studies to explore figurative language and symbolism, and also to teach English.

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## INTRODUCTION

The "They Don't Care About Us" song was released in April 1996 as the fifth single from his ninth studio album, *HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book I* (1995). The music video for this song exists in two versions. One of these was filmed in a prison and depicted a video footage of multiple references to human rights abuses from around the world.

"*They Don't Care About Us*" was a commercial success. The song topped the charts in several other countries. It also received praise from many critics and fans, who saw it as a powerful and important statement about social injustice. The song addresses themes of social injustice, discrimination, and inequality. Therefore, it is indeed a compelling choice for critical discourse analysis. A critical discourse analysis of this song can draw from various disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, cultural studies, and musicology, making it a rich and multidimensional study.

This study delves deeper than just song lyrics to explore how music videos can enhance language learning. It investigates two key areas:

1. The examination of Michael Jackson's song '*They Don't Care About Us*' using the three analysis methods suggested by Fairclough's CDA model namely description, interpretation, and explanation
2. Teaching Implications

The study explores how the integration of lyrics and visuals can be effectively utilized in language learning, taking into account the potential socio-cultural differences between the singer and the learners.

There are some researchers who have previously employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a method for interpreting songs. Their primary focus has been on uncovering the concealed messages embedded within song lyrics. A critical discourse analysis of Coldplay's song "Viva La Vida" tried to uncover the various figurative expressions and symbolic elements, ultimately contributing to the study of language. A study utilizing Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis examined the intended meaning of the song lyrics "We Shall Overcome." The analysis elaborated on the social and political conflict between Palestinians and the Israeli government (Putri & Triyono, 2018).

Another study explored the use of song lyrics with imaginative language as a teaching tool. This approach aims to develop students' ecological literacy by encouraging them to think critically and creatively about environmental issues (Rantung et al., 2023). Researchers took a deeper look at the global phenomenon "Baby Shark" to explore the connection between the song's lyrics, marketing strategies, and Korean societal values. The analysis suggests that the song's portrayal of a persistent shark might metaphorically reflect the Korean cultural emphasis on hard work. (Arif & Triyono, 2018)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Educators are increasingly recognizing the benefits of using songs to enhance language learning. Studies have shown that music can boost student motivation (Ernawati et al., 2019), encourage continued listening and enjoyment of the language (Džanić & Pejić, 2016), and even aid memory through the power of rhyme (Abdul Razak & Md Yunus, 2016). In essence, songs offer a fun and engaging way to learn a language.

Many Educators utilize popular music to keep adult learners engaged (Cardinal et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2015; Filardo-Llamas, 2015; Halperin, 2020). Encouraging students to choose songs they enjoy can further increase motivation (Leap, 2015). However, a crucial element often overlooked is cultural context. Differences between Indonesian and foreign cultures (Rymes, 2015; Monson et al., 2016; Motschenbacher, 2016) can lead to misunderstandings in song choice. Lyrics, after all, can carry significant cultural perspectives, making song selection an exercise in both language learning and cultural appreciation (Pudjiati & Zuriyati, 2022).

According to Fairclough (1995), CDA offers three principals, i.e.

1. Description (Textual analysis)

This stage answers the question: "What are the formal properties of the text?". Thus the stage focuses on the linguistic features of the text such as:

- Vocabulary: Choice of words, use of metaphors, euphemisms, or loaded terms.
- Grammar: Sentence structures, use of active or passive voice, modality.
- Textual structures: Organization of information, cohesion between sentences and paragraphs.
- Genre: The type of text (e.g., news article, political speech, advertisement). (Utami & Astuti, 2004).

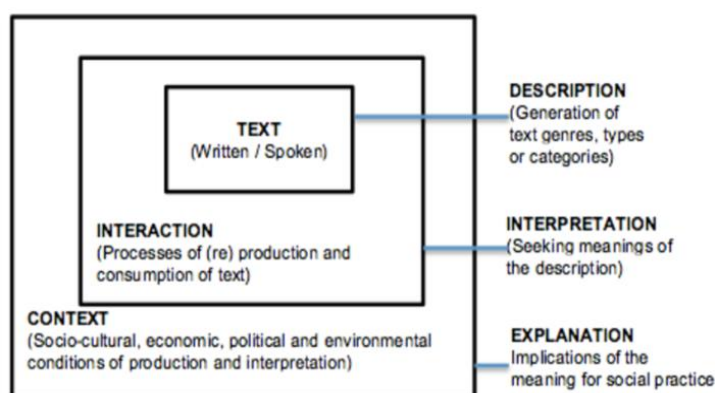
2. Interpretation (Discursive Practices /Processing analysis)

This stage relates between the text and the social context in which it is embedded. It covers

- Social Context: Examine the social and historical context in which the text was produced and consumed.
- Intertextuality : How one text relates to other other text/discourses (events, or cultural phenomena) when it was produced and consumed

3. Explanation (Social analysis)

This stage aims to understand the implications of the text towards various dimensions (economic, political, cultural, ideological)

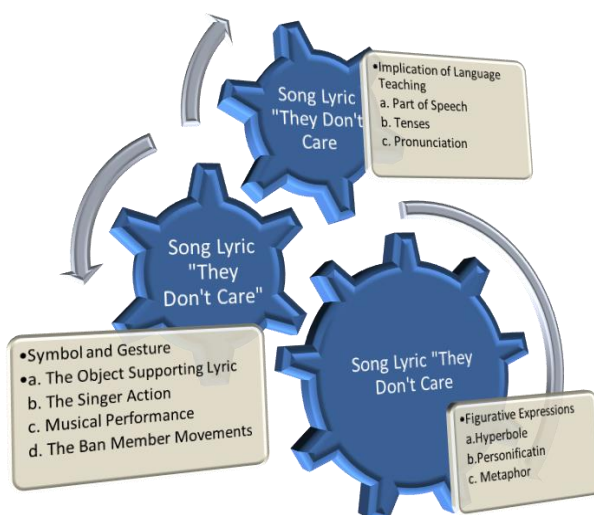


Picture 1. Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Framework for Analyzing Discourses

## METHOD

The data of this investigation is Michael Jackson's song lyric "They Don't Care About Us" which can be accessed by the link (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1pqi8vjTLY>). The data analyzed consisted of the song's lyrics and images from its video clip, which were treated as a unified entity for discourse analysis. Consequently, this research employed Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, covering description, interpretation, and explanation.

The symbolic cues in the video clip were interpreted using a semiotic approach, considering the socio-cultural background of the originating symbols (Wu & Hou, 2015; Rymes, 2015; Monson et al., 2016). This approach examines all activities, conduct, and processes involving signs, distinguishing both signs and symbols as essential elements of communication. The data examination procedure was divided into four stages. In the first stage, the descriptive analysis, the lyrics and video clip were examined to identify figurative expressions, such as hyperbole, personification, and metaphor. The second stage involved analyzing the lyrics for intertextuality and social context, based on Fairclough's interpretation principle. The third stage, called explanation (social analysis), aimed to understand the implications of the text on various dimensions such as economic, political, cultural, and ideological. In the fourth stage, the lyrics were scrutinized for their relevance to English language teaching, including parts of speech, tenses, modal verbs, etc. The process of this study is illustrated in the following chart.



Picture 2. The Analysis Process of "They Don't Care"

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Description (Text Analysis)

This part will analyze the properties of the text such as word choices, grammar, vocabulary and figurative language contained in the lyrics and video clip

#### Lexical Choices and Vocabulary

- The word choice : Some word’s choice in the lyrics such as "*Jew me*", "*rapin’ me*", "*Don’t you black or white me*” is considered derogatory and even racist. But Michael argued the use of those terms was meant to highlight the harsh reality of discrimination and prejudice existing in society
- Repetition of phrases like "*They don't really care about us*" reinforces the song's central message. Parallel structures like "*beat me, bash me*" and "*hit me, kick me*" add rhythmic impact
- Noun and Pronoun : Noun is used to identify people, situations, and things, such as "skinhead," "deadhead," "aggravation," etc. Pronouns like "they," "me," "you," and "I" are used to refer to individuals and groups, creating a personal connection between the singer and the audience, encouraging empathy.
- Verb: expresses actions and states of being, e.g., "beat," "hate," "kill," "sue," "kick," "love," "rape," "ignore," "throw," etc.
- Adjective : It provides descriptions and modify nouns, such as "bad," "black," "white," "free," "free," "bad," "shame," etc.
- Adverb: It modifies verbs. Examples "really," "never," "now," "well," "just," "only," " etc.
- Conjunction: It is used to connect ideas and phrases, facilitating the flow of the lyrics like "and," "but," and "or".
- Prepositions: like "of," "in," "on," "for," "with," "from," "by," and "about" establish relationships between words and phrases.
- Interjection : Interjection like "oh" and "no" express emotions and add emphasis to the lyrics.
- Phrasal Verb and Idiom: Phrasal verb and idiomatic expression like "throw in a class with a bad name," and "let this be" contribute to the song's figurative language.

Table 1. Types of Figurative Language in the Video Clip

Types of Figurative Language in the video clip of Figurative Languages	Lyrics
1. Repetition	The line " <i>All I want to say is that they don't really care about us</i> " is repeated throughout the lyrics.
2. Metaphor	" <i>Enough is enough of this garbage</i> ". "Garbage" is used figuratively to represent the negative aspects of society.

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|-------------------------|--|
| 3. Hyperbole            | "Everybody's gone bad" and "Everybody's gone mad" employ hyperbole, exaggerating the extent to which all people have turned negative or insane   |
| 4. Onomatopoeia         | "Bang-bang" is an example of onomatopoeia, where the word itself imitates the sound of a gunshot, adding vividness to the description  |
| 5. Personification      | The line "I look to heaven to fulfill its prophecy" personifies heaven as having the power to bring about justice and equality..   |
| 6. Irony                | The line "Your proclamation promised me free liberty, now" is ironic because despite the promise of freedom and equality, the speaker is still a victim of discrimination and injustice.                           |
| 7. Rhetorical question: | The line "Tell me, what has become of my rights?" means that the singer is not actually expecting an answer, but is instead using the question to ask about the loss of their rights as a black person in America. |
| 8. Totum pro parte      | The lyrics "The government don't wanna see" suggests that it doesn't refer to government as a whole but only some corrupt individuals within the government who do   |
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### Figurative Expressions In The Lyrics

A lyric can convey an indirect message through the processes of transferring, distorting, and creating meaning (Emzir & Rohman, 2015). As stated in the intro, it addresses social injustice, discrimination, and the desire for change, drawing listeners into its powerful message. "Don't worry what people say, we know the truth" encourages ignoring negative opinions and stereotypes, emphasizing self-truth. "Enough is enough of this garbage" expresses frustration and calls for action against unfair treatment. The repeated line "All I wanna say is that they don't really care about us" summarize the song's central message.

The analysis of the first pre-chorus of the lyrics employs rhyme and repetition to underscore societal degradation. "Skinhead, deadhead/Everybody, gone bad" highlights prejudice and moral decline. The "-ation" sound creates a rhythmic flow, with "situation aggravation" indicating worsening circumstances and tension. "Everybody, allegation" refers to unfounded accusations. The contrast between "in the suite on the news" (elite appearances) and "Everybody, dog food" (harsh realities) reflects societal disparities. "Bang-bang" and "shock dead" mimic gunshots, highlighting violence and chaos. Overall, the lyrics describe a society plagued by moral decay, media manipulation, and widespread turmoil.

The examination of the first chorus reveals that the phrase 'All I wanna say is that they don't really care about us' serves as a powerful refrain, emphasizing the

song's message about the lack of empathy from those in power. It creates a sense of unity and collective identity among the marginalized

In the second pre-chorus, the lyrics reflect defiance against violence and hatred, emphasizing resilience and strength. Lines like "*Beat me, hate me*" and "*You can never break me*" highlight the speaker's determination. References to historical discrimination ("*Jew me, sue me*" and "*Kick me, kike me*") emphasizes that all humans deserve dignity and respect. The song is a powerful reminder to persist in the fight against oppression and uphold human rights.

In the verse 1, The lyrics express confusion and disillusionment about life, with the narrator highlighting personal connections ("I have a wife and two children who love me") to underscore the impact of societal issues. References to police brutality and being a victim of hate emphasize systemic violence and discrimination. The lines "Rapin' me of my pride" and "for God's sake" vividly convey the loss of dignity and a plea for justice. The narrator's hope for divine intervention ("I look to heaven to fulfill its prophecy, Set me free") amplifies the call for equality and human rights.

In the analysis of the third pre-chorus, these lyrics employ rhythmic patterns and rhyme to vividly portray societal issues while emphasizing the narrator's resilience. "Situation, speculation / Everybody, litigation" highlights sensationalism and legal conflicts. "Beat me, bash me / You can never trash me" and "Hit me, kick me / You can never get me" address physical abuse while emphasizing the narrator's defiance and strength. The lines capture societal degradation, victimization, and the narrator's determination to withstand oppression.

The second chorus is a repetition of the first one. Examining the verse 2, the lines "Tell me what has become of my rights" highlights a sense of loss and the erosion of promised equality and basic rights. "Am I invisible 'cause you ignore me?": Conveys feelings of being marginalized and unheard, with "invisible" metaphorically portraying disregard. "Your proclamation promised me free liberty, now": Contrasts the promised freedom and liberty with the harsh reality, emphasizing the gap between rhetoric and reality. "I'm tired of bein' the victim of shame": Expresses the emotional toll of societal prejudice and systemic injustice on self-worth. "They're throwin' me in a class with a bad name": Addresses harmful stereotyping and labeling, emphasizing the damage caused by societal biases. "I can't believe this is the land from which I came": underscore the refusal to be intimidated or defined by race or ethnicity. The call for unity in "*Don't you black or white me*" Reflects disbelief that the nation the narrator once identified with could commit such injustices.

In the fourth pre-chorus, the lines "Situation, speculation / Everybody, litigation" uses rhythmic repetition to highlight the sensationalism of social issues and a society resolving conflicts through legal battles, emphasizing discord. "Beat me, bash me / You can never trash me": Rhymes and parallelism depict physical abuse and aggression, while asserting the narrator's resilience. "Hit me, kick me / You can never get me": Similar structure addresses physical mistreatment, reinforcing the narrator's indomitable spirit. This section uses rhythmic patterns, rhyme, and parallelism to depict societal degradation and victimization, while emphasizing the narrator's defiance and determination to withstand oppression.

The analysis of the bridge reveals that "Some things in life they just don't wanna see (Ah)" highlights willful blindness or denial of social issues, with "Ah"

adding emotional tone."But if Martin Luther was livin' / He wouldn't let this be, no, no": Evokes civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., suggesting he would not tolerate current injustices, contrasting historical ideals with the present. This section links presents struggles with past hopes, urging listeners to reflect on their role in promoting change.

The analysis of the last pre-chorus of the lyrics examines themes of racial division and critiques media sensationalism. "Situation, segregation" highlights racial divides, while "Everybody, allegation" criticizes scapegoating, particularly of people of color. "In the suite on the news / Everybody dog food" critiques media sensationalism, especially involving people of color. "Kick me, kike me" references historical discrimination against Jews, and "Don't you wrong or right me" calls for respect regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion. The song serves as a powerful reminder of ongoing racism and police brutality, urging listeners to advocate for justice and equality.

### **Symbolic sign and gestures in The Video Clip**

The music video for "They Don't Care About Us (Prison Version)" is attention-grabbing for the background, the singer movement, the properties used and their costumes support the lyric. This majestic combination created cognitive and non-cognitive content elements that affect close interaction (Brame, 2016).

There are some specific symbols and images that reveal several key messages



Picture 3: Inmates

The video depicts inmates behind bars, symbolizing their loss of freedom and reinforcing the song's message of neglect with "they don't really care about us." It highlights how prisoners, often marginalized, are mistreated and neglected.



Picture 4: War and unrest

The video includes images of war and unrest, serving as a global reminder that destruction, racism, and regime brutality are pervasive issues beyond the United States.



Picture 5: Michael Jackson in prison

### Critical Discourse Analysis in The Song “They Don’t Care About Us” By Michael Jackson

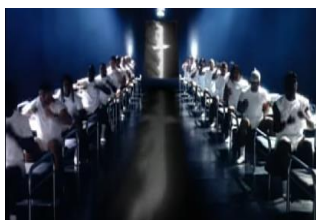
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The image of Michael Jackson in prison attire sets the video's tone, symbolizing his confrontation with cycles of violence and oppression. It represents the systemic persecution faced by Jackson and many others.



Picture 6 : Michael Jackson’s interaction with prisoners

Throughout the video, Michael Jackson interacts with prisoners, dancing and singing alongside them. His presence symbolizes empathy and support, suggesting solidarity with the persecuted and a call for change



Picture 7 : Dancing with prisoners

The video showcases inmates dancing and playing music together within the prison walls, emphasizing the resilience and adaptability of the human spirit in challenging environments. It suggests that music and self-expression offer solace and strength to those incarcerated



Picture 8 : The Guard’s surveillance

The video emphasizes power imbalances between inmates and guards, showing guards overseeing inmates and highlighting unequal power dynamics. This restricts the inmates' freedom and rights, underscoring their marginalized status



Picture 9 : Raising fist

The video ends with a powerful image of Michael Jackson and the inmates raising his fist in the air is a gesture of hope and defiance in unity. It is a reminder that even in the face of oppression, there is always hope for change

## 2. Interpretation (Processing Analysis)

This part will explore the intertextuality between the song and its social context in which it is embedded

### Social Context:

The song was released in 1995. In the years leading up to the song's release, there were significant events that fueled these tensions, such as the Rodney King beating in 1991 and the Los Angeles riots in 1992. It addresses issues of social injustice, racism, police brutality, and systemic oppression. These issues are central to the social analysis

This historical backdrop is crucial for understanding the song's message. Jackson's lyrics reflect the frustration and anger of marginalized communities facing persistent discrimination and violence

### Intertextuality:

- The song alludes to historical figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Franklin D. Roosevelt, invoking their legacy to criticize current social conditions.

## 3. Explanation

This stage aims to understand the text's implications across various dimensions, including power and ideology, social practice, and cultural aspects

### Power and Ideology:

- The song critiques the power structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice, highlighting how those in authority fail to address the concerns of marginalized groups.
- By repeatedly stating "they don't really care about us," Jackson underscores a sense of disenfranchisement and neglect felt by these communities.

### Social Practice:

- The song serves as a form of protest, using music as a platform to raise awareness about social issues and to call for change.
- It challenges listeners to recognize and confront systemic injustices, promoting a discourse of resistance and empowerment.

### Cultural aspects

- The song's message resonates across different cultures and contexts, reflecting universal themes of oppression and the struggle for human rights. It encourages solidarity among those who face similar struggles, fostering a sense of global interconnectedness in the fight against injustice

## 4. The implication of the song for language learning

Song lyrics are valued for their linguistic, pedagogical, cultural, and entertaining aspects, making them valuable language learning materials. They can enhance young learners' grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening skills. Songs create a stress-free, enjoyable learning environment, offering numerous benefits, including improved pronunciation practice (Kumar et al., 2022)

This section holds significance regarding the song's implications for language learning such as:

- a. Verb Tenses: Identify various verb tenses used in the song lyrics. Look for examples of present simple ("*They don't care about us*"), present continuous ("*They're throwin' me in a class with a bad name*"), present perfect ("*Tell me*")

- what has become of my life*"), past simple (*"Your proclamation promised me free liberty"*), and past continuous (*"But it Roosevelt was living"*).
- b. Sentence Types: Analyze different sentence types in the lyrics. Identify declarative sentences/statements (*I'm tired of bein' the victim of hate*), imperative/commands sentences (*Throw the brother in jail*), interrogative sentences (*Am I invisible 'cause you ignore me?*), and exclamatory sentences (*Oh, for God's sake*). This will help you understand how the songwriter conveys messages effectively.
  - c. Reported Speech: Identify examples of direct speech that are reported in the song. Practice converting direct speech to reported speech, paying attention to changes in verb tense and pronoun usage. For instance, (*"Tell me what has become of my life"* can be transformed into reported speech as *"He asked me what had become of his life."*)
  - d. Modal Verbs: Pay attention to modal verbs like "can," "will," and "would" in the song. Analyze how these verbs are used to express possibility, impossibility, willingness and so on. For example, *"You can never break me"* conveys the idea of impossibility
  - e. Complex Sentences: Identify instances of complex sentences that include dependent clauses and independent clauses. Analyze how these clauses are connected and how they contribute to the overall meaning of the song. For instance
    - Adjective clause: *I have a wife and two children who love me*
    - Noun clause: *All I want to say is that they don't really care about us*
    - Adverbial clause: *Am I invisible 'cause you ignore me?*
  - f. Vocabulary Building: Extract new words and phrases from the song lyrics. Look up their meanings, and try to understand how they are used in the context of the song
  - g. Listening Skills: Listening to the song helps improve auditory comprehension and the ability to understand spoken English, particularly in the context of music, which often includes rhythm, rhyme, and lyrical nuances

## CONCLUSION

Examining the song "They Don't Care About Us" through textual analysis reveals the use of vocabulary, grammar, and provocative terms to convey messages of social injustice, resistance, and empowerment. The recurring line "All I want to say is that they don't really care about us" underscores his central message of institutional apathy towards social inequality. Analyzing from the dimension of interpretation (discursive analysis), the song's background is tied to a period of social and political unrest in 1995, referencing events such as the Rodney King beating and subsequent riots. It presents a thought-provoking commentary on social injustices, particularly within the prison system. The song alludes to historical figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Franklin D. Roosevelt, suggesting their ideals of equality have been forgotten. From the point of Explanation (Social Analysis), it can be concluded that Fairclough's CDA approach reveals how "They Don't Care About Us" functions as a powerful critique of social injustice, using provocative language and music to challenge societal norms and power structures. Therefore, the song serves as a form of protest, using music as a platform to raise

awareness about social issues and to call for change. The song introduces a range of vocabulary, including everyday terms and more complex words. This can help learners expand their language learning. The song can also be used to help improve auditory comprehension such as rhythm, rhyme, and lyrical nuances. In addition, By analyzing the grammatical structures used in the song, learners can see practical applications of grammar rules and how they contribute to meaning By engaging with "They Don't Care About Us" through Fairclough's CDA framework, language learners can develop not only linguistic competence but also critical thinking skills and cultural awareness. This approach will encourage students to engage with authentic, socially relevant material.

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