

## Examining Racial Taboo through X-phemism in the TV Show *Black-ish*

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Taboos occur in everyday life as part of language and culture. One typical way of addressing them is through euphemism; however, sometimes the taboo is broken in informal, interpersonal or joking situations in phenomena like *friendly banter* or *playing the dozens*. With this in mind, this article aims to analyze the linguistic resources employed in the US sitcom *Black-ish* (2014-) to convey the boundaries between the need for respect for black racial backgrounds and the breaking of existing taboos for shock value or in friendly environments within the humorous context projected by the series. To this end, we rely on appraisal theory. The results will show how the series uses x-phemism and polarization as major resources of the black community to reflect their assimilation, separation, integration or marginalization in the United States in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: racial taboo; x-phemism; playing the dozens; *Black-ish*; humor; appraisal theory

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### El tabú racial a través del x-femismo en la serie televisiva *Black-ish*

El tabú forma parte de la vida cotidiana, pues es parte de la lengua y la cultura. Una forma habitual de lidiar con él es el eufemismo. No obstante, el tabú se rompe frecuentemente en relaciones informales o interpersonales y en ambientes distendidos mediante el llamado *insulto ritual*. Con estas premisas, el presente artículo analiza los recursos lingüísticos de la comedia *Black-ish* (2014-) para expresar los límites entre el respeto a la cultura e historia negras y la ruptura del tabú en ambientes distendidos con fines sorpresivos dentro del contexto humorístico de la serie. Para ello empleamos la teoría de la valoración. Los resultados demuestran cómo la serie emplea el x-femismo y la polarización como recursos significativos de la población negra para reflejar su asimilación, separación, integración o marginalización en los Estados Unidos del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: tabú racial; x-femismo; insulto ritual; *Black-ish*; humor; teoría de la valoración

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Political correctness and linguistic prescription constantly attempt to censor language that should be avoided for social, political, sexual or religious reasons (Moreno Fernández 1998, 201) in order to prevent discomfort, harm or offense in a specific context (Allan and Burridge 2006, 1).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the striving of black people to overcome the suffering of slavery and their subsequent marginalization in the United States provides rich grounds for the study of linguistic taboo, since no other community has historically been “as denigrated by ethnic slur as the blacks” (Hughes 2006, 25), traditionally related to negative stereotypes such as loudness, laziness or rudeness (Fairchild 1985, 50). However, in the 1960s, the black community started to perceive the term *black* positively and associate it with desirable qualities, as part of a heritage that should endure rather than be hidden or assimilated (Smith 1992). That implies the construction of another kind of stereotype being produced within the group which has no need for external validation.

Comedy is a breeding ground for the polarization of ideological extremes, since the tradition of humor includes techniques of exaggeration, ridicule, coincidence, repetition and misunderstanding (Berger 1993), revealing relations of power (Pérez and Greene 2016, 265). This permits the crossing of the line of socially acceptable behavior and language in interpersonal relationships. However, even in the twenty-first century and despite Obama’s Presidency, the situation of the black community in the US does not seem to have changed much. The Black Lives Matter Movement was triggered by recent shootings of black citizens by the police. This movement’s political discourse is based on the persistence of the dichotomy ingroup/us versus outgroup/them in such a way that “us” are represented positively (positive self-presentation) and “them” negatively (negative other-presentation) (Dijk 1999, 95). Speakers persuasively spread their inner group’s assumptions “to express, confirm, and show allegiance to group goals, values, and norms, and may thus evaluate group actions towards ethnic outgroups” (Dijk 1997, 26).

Taking the above into consideration, this article aims to gain some insight into the linguistic expression of the subtle boundaries between the need for respect for black racial backgrounds and the breaking of existing taboos for shock value or insider-friendly banter in the US comedy show *Black-ish* (2014-) made for ABC Studios. The choice of this particular TV sitcom is not random since *Black-ish* has been addressed from a social perspective that deals with black identity and popular culture (Childs 2015), making it suitable for the study of the linguistic and sociopragmatic dimensions of taboo. To this end, we rely on Maite Taboada and Jack Grieve’s appraisal method (2004, 159-61), based on James Robert Martin’s appraisal (2000) and Martin and Peter R. White’s appraisal theory (2005).

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this article was presented at Taboo Humo(u)r: Language, Culture, Society, and the Media (TaCo2016), a conference held at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, on September 20-21, 2016.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Linguistic taboo, “existent in all societies and cultures and at all times” (Horlacher 2010, 3), is associated with many everyday occurrences in life (Walker 2014, 1). Taboos are culturally revealing, as they “can be considered as symptoms of the customs, censorship or bad habits of the society” (Crespo-Fernández 2015, 1). A common way of addressing taboos is through *euphemism* and *dysphemism*. Euphemism is defined in terms of politeness as “sweet talking” (Allan and Burridge 2006, 1) or “the process whereby the taboo is stripped of its most explicit or obscene overtones” (Crespo-Fernández 2015, 2). The word *African-American*, for example, was born as a euphemism; it was promoted in the second half of the twentieth century by a movement led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson “to shift the definition of the group from the racial description black to a cultural and ethnic identity that ties the group to its continent of origin and fosters dignity and self-esteem,” but it has always been surrounded by skepticism (Wilkerson 1989). Contrariwise, dysphemism is “speaking offensively” (Allan and Burridge 2006, 1) or “the process whereby the most pejorative traits of the taboo are highlighted with an offensive aim to the addressee or to the concept itself” (Crespo-Fernández 2015, 2). These processes, therefore, allow people to speak of the unspeakable or of taboo topics in the public domain, “either with the aim of preserving or violating the proscription imposed by society or by ourselves” (Crespo-Fernández 2015, 2). An example of this is Irving L. Allen’s (1983) list of 240 derogatory terms for black people under eleven different headings, including variations of the noun *Negro* and *black*, allusions to color, general stereotypes on given names or occupations, cultural references or status degradation.

However, a word or expression is not euphemistic or dysphemistic per se, but rather depends on the context and the speakers’ intentions and, as such, “the euphemistic or dysphemistic quality of a word can never be considered as an intrinsic quality of the word regardless of context” (Crespo-Fernández 2008, 107). For instance, the expressions *African-American* and *colored*, first conceived as euphemistic, have become quasi-dysphemistic due to their ability to hurt sensitivities. In fact, “the dividing line between taboo and dysphemism is, on occasions, quite blurred” and it is precisely these “conflicting emotions and antagonistic feelings [that] facilitate the existence of dysphemistic euphemisms and euphemistic dysphemisms” (Casas Gómez 2012, 43). This phenomenon is known as *x-phemism* because of the versatility of specific lexical units that can be considered mitigating or offensive depending on the particular context (Allan and Burridge 2006, 29). *Dysphemistic euphemism*, also called *quasi-euphemism*, refers to “items which are used positively to display friendship, solidarity, affection or intimacy despite their dysphemistic locution,” while *euphemistic dysphemism*, or *quasi-dysphemism*, includes “those language expressions which, despite their socially acceptable disguise, are intentionally offensive” (Crespo-Fernández 2015, 46). Dysphemistic exaggeration and quasi-euphemism constitute a humoristic device, rooted in Stephen Burgen’s *joking relationships* (1996) and Geoffrey Leech’s *banter principle*, which consists in saying

something that is clearly not true and obviously rude but shows solidarity towards the recipient in a friendly or informal context (1983, 144-45)—that is, displaying friendship through rudeness, ritual insult or *friendly banter* (Allan and Burridge 2006, 87). Some of these common linguistic resources used to create tension and laughter in an amusing atmosphere, known as *playing the dozens* (Chimezie 1976, 401; Kihara 2015, 1) or *ritual put-downs* (Montgomery 1995), are considered essential features of black culture in the United States.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

As stated before, we have followed Taboada and Grieve's (2004, 159-61) approach, based on Martin's appraisal (2000) and Martin and White's appraisal theory (2005), which deal with emotions by classifying texts according to their subjective content or sentiment and taking into account contextual and pragmatic aspects, especially as regards the identification of ambiguous units. Taboada and Grieve categorize expressions regarding their positive or negative orientation in order to examine language examples and text structure, since appraisal theory analyzes how attitudes, judgments and emotive responses are presented in texts and how these expressions could be postulated as a challenge or contradiction by those with differing views (White 2015). Therefore, we focus on *attitude* or *attitudinal positioning*, as it permits the understanding of how writers or speakers use feelings and emotional reactions, judgments of behavior and meaning to positively or negatively assess people, places, things, happenings and states of affairs (White 2015). With that purpose, expressions are classified under the following categories: *affect* or *emotion*, the positive or negative emotional inclination to a person, thing, happening or state of affairs; *judgment* or *ethics*, the assessment of behavior regarding rules or conventions of behavior; and *appreciation* or *aesthetics*, the assessment of human artifacts, natural objects and human individuals according to their value in a particular field (Martin and White 2005, 42-43).

X-phemistic language has been examined under Taboada and Grieve's appraisal method (2004, 159-61), with its crucial division into positive and negative semantic orientation of words. Both orientations are essential to determine what category of x-phemism a unit belongs to through the evaluation of a character's opinions and attitudes along with other pragmatic aspects, like the context of each scene. From this standpoint, our method comprised two parts: first, expressions were designated as having either a positive or a negative orientation, after which they were categorized as appreciation or comment on a thing, judgment or comment on a person, and affect or comment on one's self. A formula indicating the number of season and episode was employed, as in (1x01) for season 1, episode 1. Whenever different examples are found under a single formula, it means they belong to the same episode.

#### 4. *BLACK-ISH*, THE TV SHOW

*Black-ish* portrays the life of a contemporary upper-middle class family in suburban Los Angeles, the Johnsons, composed of (married) couple Andre (Dre) and Rainbow (Bow), their children—Zoey (15), Junior (14), and twins Jack and Diane (8), joined in season 4 by baby DeVante—and grandparents Ruby and Pops, and pays particular attention to their identity issues as a black family amidst a mostly white society. Dre, the father and main character, shows how many scenes of his daily life trigger cultural challenges about his feelings of belonging to the black community, which he explains with frequent voiceovers. According to its producer, Larry Wilmore, the series is about “celebrating black more as a culture than as a race” (Moraes 2014). The first season, comprising our corpus, received five awards from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which, to a great extent, implies the association’s support for the approach to race taken by the series.

Kenya Barris, the series’s creator and executive producer, who sought to ensure the ethnic diversity of the screenwriters, declares the sitcom is inspired by his own personal and work experience (Nussbaum 2016). The pilot episode (2014) depicts an initial synopsis where Dre, a black man who lives and works in a mainly white community, which he acknowledges as a sign of his success, is put in charge of an urban section of publicity specifically aimed at black clients. This provides an opportunity for him to reflect on his identity, as our analysis of his linguistic choices shows.

The show provides a platform to make the ingroup values visible to a wider outgroup audience (Vickers 2018) and its approach on race has been perceived by some as controversial due to its alleged promotion of “ugly racial bigotry” (Peyser 2015). In fact, there was an unfruitful petition on *Change.org* to cancel the series on the grounds of it being “racist, socially damaging and offensive based on its concept that nonstereotypical black people are less their race than others, that hip hop culture is all blacks are supposed to embrace, and that culture and race are one in [*sic*] the same.” It also received a tweet from Donald Trump accusing it of “racism at the highest level” (Jones 2014). Barris, who claims only 23% of his audience is black, defends the premise of the show by arguing that he considers racial issues to be a matter of concern in an increasingly divided society (Holloway 2016).

#### 5. ANALYSIS

The corpus for our study is composed of the scripts of the twenty-four episodes of season one, where the series’s general concept of racial identity is presented. The show includes the two main backgrounds in the life of the protagonist, Dre: his house and Stevens & Lido, the publishing company he works for. Both environments reflect the continuous choices of the acculturation strategies of assimilation, separation, integration or marginalization made by black people in their daily lives in the United States in the twenty-first century (Berry 1997). At home, his concern is to prevent his four children—

especially the two teenagers—from assimilation into white mainstream culture, which seems the natural path given the upper-middle class status they have grown up in. Dre persistently struggles for them to be proud of their heritage, thus perpetuating his Pops's continuous reproaches to him for trying to act white or ignoring his black heritage. This battle is balanced by the actions of his wife, Bow, who, being biracial herself and having become a doctor thanks to equality scholarships, does not judge the system so negatively. She embodies the advantages of mingling with white population and culture, in a search for a peaceful coexistence aligned with Martin Luther King Jr.'s hopes for America in his "I Have a Dream" (1963) speech, which she in fact quotes on occasion. However, Bow's viewpoint is depicted as too naïve, as the show privileges Dre's perspective and he feels continuously challenged by his colleagues to define his concept of blackness.

The results of the analysis are presented below, starting with Martin and White's (2005) categories of affect or emotion, followed by appreciation or aesthetics and finishing with judgment or ethics.

### 5.1. Affect or Emotion

Regarding affect or emotion, most expressions revolve around the positive connotations of blackness. Dre uses the first person singular and plural indistinguishably, thus revealing that he regards himself as an archetype of the black population, which he strongly identifies with. It is sometimes difficult to discern whether he is referring to feelings or judgment/ethics, as he conveys many ideas which might be considered value judgments or his own perceptions and, thus, his use of "us" is usually euphemistic.

Affect is frequently employed to show his very positive self-esteem derived from being black, even if many of the gags demonstrate his many insecurities. Thus, the formerly taboo word *black*, potentially dysphemistic, is turned into a positive quality in the meaningful first line of the sitcom: "I'm just your standard, regular ol' incredibly handsome, unbelievably charismatic black dude." By playing off "standard, regular" against extremely positive attributes—"incredibly handsome" and "unbelievably charismatic"—he seems to be creating a formula in which those binomials are equated and thus he playfully implies that average people in his ethnic group are stunningly beautiful.

The concept of blackness is included in a euphemistic, synaesthetic metaphor to indicate that this color is intrinsically attractive, as when Dre tells Bow "me and my sweet cinnamon lips" (1x02). This is also a metonymy, as a part of the body (lips) stands for the person. His elder daughter Zoey, who uploads a makeup video tutorial, also conveys this feeling when she states: "I don't use bronzer because I have good skin. But my third best friend, Michelle, doesn't. As you can see, Michelle is very pale" (1x07). Therefore, her white friend is in need of blusher.

Being black is an asset that can be added to other positive features, as Dre says in "you know, I'm cool, plus I'm black, which is cool, so I win twice" (1x03). Blackness is

also viewed as positive in sports, thus assuming the general belief that black people are skilled at sports like basketball. Moreover, ethnic confrontation expresses the difference between black and white sportspeople and so—as in the aforementioned list by Allen (1983)—typical white people's proper names become quasi-dysphemistic as they represent white, less skilled basketball players. Dre also thinks that white players, even at their physical prime (twenty-five years old), cannot compare to black sportspeople even at an older age, such as forty:

- (1) "I'm just saying, if you're gonna keep playing basketball, I think you really need to play a less intense game, maybe with more Colins and Ethans and less Maliks and Jamals."  
 "Are you trying to tell me I belong in a white game?"  
 "Oh, I'm absolutely telling you that. White game. Game of Whites. Black 40 is the white 25." (1x17)

Dre's racial pride merges with Black Nationalism and its creation of a cultural identity.<sup>2</sup> Black, however, also implies suffering and this is where negative linguistic appreciation finds its own space. When fighting with himself to keep this black essence, Dre repeatedly envisions Compton, his hometown, in contrast with LA. This is a confrontation between idealized memories of childhood, where life used to be humble but "decidedly black," and their present upper-class but "blackish" existence—in other words, it is implied that the more money they have, the less black and the whiter their lifestyle becomes. Dre and his father find comfort in constantly advocating a black life, even if, according to the latter, it includes three things: "stay black, pay taxes and die" (1x20). As used by Pops in a conversation with Dre, the expression "pay taxes" (1x20) also refers to how the whites take advantage of black people sometimes. Pops uses it in a simplistic and euphemistic way to express his opinion that white people expect to financially exploit black people while ensuring that they conduct their lives separately from them.

Everything seems systematically more complicated for black people, as Dre explains in this voiceover:

- (2) "The only problem is, whatever American had this dream probably wasn't where I'm from. And if he was, he should've mentioned the part about how when brothers start getting a little money, stuff starts getting a little weird like in my neighborhood." (1x01)

Dre thereby illuminates the fact that even if upward mobility implies the end of economic issues, it also marks the beginning of odd relationships with both black and white people.

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<sup>2</sup> Black Nationalism or the Black Movement see black people as a nation per se. Even if they live in different places or countries, they consider themselves a single community, hence the use of *nation*.



Affect or emotion present black people negatively or ironically highlight whites' images of the black community through various, dysphemistic or quasi-dysphemistic, figures of speech. For example, Dre expresses how he felt scrutinized by his white neighbors through a reverie where a tourist jeep appears with the guide saying, "you'll see the mythical and majestic Black Family out of their natural habitat and yet still thriving" (1x01), as he and the rest of the family wave. Thus, despite the guide's mention of the grandeur of the scene, Dre points to the intrinsically dehumanizing gaze of white people, which frames them as if he and his family were animals observed on safari. This clearly evokes the metaphor BLACK PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS. In *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, George Lakoff and Mark Turner discuss the Great Chain of Being metaphor (1989, 166-81), which propounds the notion that animals are inferior to humans, and animals is one the derogatory categories identified by Allen (1983).

According to Dre, white standards reduce a black man to being seen as necessarily either menacing or helpless and in need of white redemption. He evokes the former when he compares himself to Donald Bogle's stereotype of the violent, sexualized Buck (2016), as when he says "not that I want to go back to the days of being the big scary black guy. But I have to admit it did kind of have its advantages" (1x01). In other words, he prefers negative stereotypes to cultural misappropriation. On the other hand, the image of the helpless black man is found in Dre's voiceover: "well if you believe every Hollywood movie ever made, [...] any black guy gets anywhere with the help of a white guy" (1x20).

When dealing with the linguistic concept of blackness, words referring to this ethnic group become crucial, due to the strongly dysphemistic connotations of certain terms and the emotional impact involved in the definition of this community. The second season starts with an episode, "The Word," in which the n-word—always hidden under a bleep sound—is categorically rejected even inside the ingroup. This contravenes the aforementioned rule by which words are not intrinsically euphemistic or dysphemistic (Chamizo Domínguez 2004, 45; Crespo-Fernández 2008, 107). Even if the show reflects different points of view throughout its various episodes, Dre and Bow completely agree on the unacceptability of this term, even among black people or friends. The sound effect covering the word officializes this viewpoint as that of the team behind the fiction. Other expressions used by the most critical characters, namely Dre and Pops, like "the black folks," are regarded as acceptable. Pops uses the pejorative, dysphemistic word Negro when he tells Dre, "you got to make an adjustment for the Negro inflation tax" (1x01), to emphasize that black people have to make economic sacrifices just because of their ethnic group, which is regarded as socially disadvantaged.

The series promotes the idea that other vocabulary choices, like "colored people" (1x09), should preferably be rejected in favor of "black," as inferred from their use in the script. The word "black" refers to very positive traits within the context of the ingroup, so there is no longer any need for euphemism, like "African-American." As Pops says, "We



black, not African. Africans don't even like us" (1x01), although "African-American" is retained by Dre when he speaks to white people in his office, usually clients (1x20). The preferential "black" is used 180 times—31 in 1x01, 23 in 1x03, 1 in 1x04, 5 in 1x06, 8 in 1x06, 1 in 1x07, 3 in 1x08, 13 in 1x10, 1 in 1x11, 25 in 1x12, 6 in 1x14, 3 in 1x15, 6 in 1x16, 7 in 1x17, 3 in 1x19, 18 in 1x20, 2 in 1x21, 3 in 1x22, 18 in 1x23 and 2 in 1x24—whereas "African-American" appears only 3 times—1x09, 1x20 and 1x22—and each time it is in order to show how white people see black people.

The show is particularly concerned about another word, *urban*. The pilot episode focuses on the rejection of this term when applied to black culture. Dre, who, as mentioned above, has been put in charge of an urban section of publicity specifically aimed at black clients, considers it annoying because it is an artificial construct used to refer to contemporary black culture from a white point of view. The term became popular after World War II, in the context of the mass migrations caused by suburbanization and the rural exodus. *Urban* was used euphemistically to refer to predominantly poor communities populated chiefly by "people of color" (Truscott and Truscott 2005, 123). In the series, the term is rejected since it has been defined by mainstream culture, which reflects predominantly the views of white people. In a voiceover, Dre expresses his resentment that urban celebrities are often from outside the community:

(3) "Sometimes I worry that, in an effort to make it, black folks have dropped a little bit of their culture and the rest of the world has picked it up. They even renamed it *urban*. And in the urban world, Justin Timberlake and Robin Thicke are R&B gods, Kim Kardashian's the symbol for big butts, and Asian guys are just unholdable on the dance floor." (1x01; italics added)

As used in the show, "urban" is never interpreted in its literal sense, but usually quasi-dysphemistically, since as a once-intended euphemism it is ultimately offensive. In another voiceover, Dre claims, "urban can also mean hip, cool and colorful, just like my family" (1x01). But even if here the main character accepts that the term could be positive and applied to his own family, it is still a case of euphemism with negative connotations and so quasi-dysphemistic, as he alludes to himself through his use of the words "can also." Moreover, he claims he cannot be identified with "urban"—"the funny thing is I didn't feel urban. I just feel like a dad who was willing to do whatever he had to for his family. And isn't that the American Dream?" (1x01)—so he clearly appears to still be wrestling with the concept. This lack of a clear position seems to be the key to the title of the show, as the term *blackish* reflects the struggle against the assimilation of black culture in the United States. The very title thus defines the inner anxiety of the main character that he should not lose his true black essence, whatever it may be.

This might be linked to the binary split between two groups, white ("them") and black ("us") people. The following example illustrates this clearly, together with the quasi-dysphemistic use of "urban":

(4) “I said I wanted to be the first black SVP for Stevens & Lido, when, actually, I wanted to be the first SVP who happened to be black.”

“What’s the difference? Obama’s the first black President. I mean, does that make him any less President? No.”

“No, because he’s the first black President of the United States, not the first black President of the *Urban* United States.” (1x01; italics added)

This sense of polarization denotes a constant awareness of the opposition between black people and mainstream white culture, which is often present in conversations about race, reflecting dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Gillota 2013, 2, 6). Humor concerning minorities of any kind is essentially built through stereotypes grounded in the opposition between those belonging to the mainstream group and the rest of society. This conception of two opposed groups is also used in the context of politics, where the speaker’s aim is to persuade voters that they all share certain values and that those values are being threatened by another interest group. This is the sense in which Dre’s voiceover speeches should be interpreted. Indeed, he even makes the political claim that “the White House was just that white until one man broke through and gave my people hope” (1x10), thus alluding to the difference between black and white politicians in their approach to the black community.

Dre also insists that the fact that black people are not Republicans is axiomatic. He is fond of his people’s loyalty to black candidates and mentions that 91% of black people voted for Obama. His own fidelity to Obama is expressed with a hyperbole, “he could have dropped-kick this baby, and I still would have voted for him” (1x23). Dre considers that the fact that his son Junior identifies as a Republican is another sign that the family is losing their black identity. Even his moderate wife Bow is clear regarding her different political attachment and her view of herself and her family as “compassionate liberals who believe in tolerance, acceptance ... open” (1x23), to which Dre adds they are black and that is all that matters. Later in the same speech he says “you can’t be a black Republican” to his son Junior and provides a polarized reason: “they are not down for us, so we are not down for them.” In the same episode, when he is asked if he is suggesting all Republicans are racist, he says, “No, of course not. But they are.” Therefore, being a Republican is a veiled dysphemism. Through this exaggeration, Dre humorously tries to appear as a tolerant person while defending a reductionistic Democratic perspective. The expression “Uncle Tom,” another stereotype identified by Bogle (2016), also appears as a dysphemistic term to refer to Republican black men, the darlings of the Republican whites (Hughes 2006, 476), once again from a simplistic Democratic perspective.

This permanent feeling of being confronted by the white world makes Dre mention that a white colleague calls him “Drigitty-Dre-Dre,” “Big Dre” and “Mister Senior Vee-peezy” (1x01), using Snoop Dogg’s slang so as to be friendly with him, which Dre considers “inappropriate” (1x01) as he feels reduced to a particular music and belittled

as a professional. Thus the expressions become instances of quasi-dysphemism. This seems the rule in his office, where nobody is able to find appropriate ways to cross cultural gaps and address him properly, at least in terms of Dre's standards: "As a black man in corporate America, my days are pretty much filled with a series of awkward handshakes." Some colleagues try to behave as if they are a "brother" and one person even calls his family "those people you live with" (1x20). He also resents being expected to use Ebonics (that is, African-American vernacular English) to address the urban division customers: "Keepin' it real isn't some checklist you find on *Yo! MTV Raps*." In contrast, his black colleague Charlie of the urban division seems comfortable with the office environment and communication styles. Dre in fact lives a constant contradiction. He assumes he has been promoted because of his professional merits, but he discovers that his employers' principal motivation was that they highly value his clear vision of black identity, which could help the company target black customers. Paradoxically, he is bothered by this, as he does not identify with their proposals for targeting black clients. For instance, in his view, using Ebonics or speaking like a rapper implies infantilism, lack of professional standards or even cultural misappropriation by white people.

Polarization is distinctly seen when, before his promotion, Dre says: "If I could have your attention at Stevens & Lido, there was a clear separation between lower management and upper management. And that always made me feel like it was us versus them" (1x01). That is, the two ethnic groups are seen as both polarized and asymmetrical, with whites being considered the superior race. Dre constantly resorts to this kind of binary vision, even in the ingroup. He claims that black people "have a double consciousness," their mainstream selves in "The Man's world," an allusion to James Brown's song "It's a Man's Man's Man's World" (1966), and their down-home selves for the "brothers" (1x20). This last term is an epithet used in the ingroup to replace "black men." His words clearly show that black people have to behave in specific ways to fit in the white world, but at the same time be proud of their roots and be themselves.

Finally, Dre, unlike Bow, perceives second (and hostile) intentions in white comments, as when he is offended when his son Jack is praised for being a natural athlete, as he would prefer him to be noticed because of his intelligence. This feeling is intensified when his son is compared to a panther. Bow, on the other hand, considers the praise and comparison "cool." Dre's sense of insult stems from the same animal dysphemism as in his safari park reverie.

## 5.2. Appreciation or Aesthetics

Appreciation uses the two euphemistic terms *urban* and *black* to assess an individual in regard to their value in a particular field. The statement "I may have to be *urban* at work, but I'm still going to need my family to be *black*" (1x01; italics added) shows how Dre resents being categorized by whites as urban, in contrast with black people's

criteria. Dre continually fights with the concept and basically only accepts it when black people (his ingroup) use it and considers it a case of quasi-dysphemism when used by whites.

Dre finds it ironic to discover that one of his children does not really know what prejudice is when they are in “a backwoods convenience store gratuitously named Whitey’s,” where the white storekeeper gives them “the white-man once-over” (1x12). He states that the owner is watching them like a hawk so that they do not steal anything. Even though he is critical of the stereotype, he exploits it by pretending to be stealing something in order to demonstrate to his son that the white storekeeper is a racist.

Positive appreciation is frequently made by Dre through approbatory references to black cultural aspects, namely soul—*soulicious*—food or typically black dishes like tater tots or turkey, especially his mother’s “spread fried pork chops, biscuits, thick-ass gravy” (1x08). Black food is persistently presented as superior to white food—exemplified by white or frozen yogurt or vegan pasta—and as signaling the embrace of a particular culture, as when Dre is talking to Pops about his children’s friends: “Are we talking raw, uncut biggie black or Low-Cal Drake black?” (1x03), where reference is made to biracial musician Drake as a symbol for the *not-so-black*.

Another instantiation of black culture is the nod, which Dre describes as “the internationally accepted, yet unspoken, sign of acknowledgement of black folks” (1x03) around the world. He affirms that it is their duty to give the nod. He also talks about the aforementioned linguistic resource of playing the dozens, a phenomenon traditionally considered a part of quasi-euphemism. The expression becomes a case of quasi-dysphemism in the example below, since it is seen as a way to stereotype black people and as a slur that Dre traces back to slavery and the ability of black people to address their problems with a game of nonsensical insults similar to those traded between siblings:

(5) “The dozens? Yeah, you see, we come from a long, proud African tradition of talking trash. [...] Long ago, opposing African tribes didn’t actually fight. They’d just make fun of each other. Later, those same dudes came across the ocean on something like *The Love Boat* only no love, all Isaacs, pissed-off Isaacs. Eventually, they arrived in America, and the less-desirable slaves were sold by the dozen. But they found a way to turn their pain into something positive by making fun of each other. That’s what we call *playing the dozens*. [...] Through the years, our ancestors found the comedy in pain.” (1x15)

False compliments and the standardized expression of friendly banter “you big” prove to be simple and powerful, especially since they seem to easily intimidate some white characters.

As explained in the example of “urban,” misappropriation of black culture is a matter of concern for Dre, who resents how his wife and children prefer to sing and perform white Meghan Trainor’s song “All about that Bass” (2014) when he is trying

to explain the importance of racial prejudice on the occasion of Martin Luther King Jr. Day (1x12). However, he does affirm that “a black guy can marry someone white and still be cool” (1x23); he provides a long list of names, such as Kanye West, Tiger Woods and Cuba Gooding Jr., and goes on to say that it is the same as him being part of mostly white America without losing his identity. In short, some expressions or concepts might be understood as positive if used by a black person or negative if uttered by a white person since they are considered misappropriation.

### 5.3. Judgment or ethics

Judgment is very fruitful as there are many comments on individual people. Dre constantly tries to promote and instill a positive attitude towards black culture in his family, but he also alludes to white celebrities—“next to him, you’ll be Denzel Clooney Kodjoe Chestnut” (1x02)—thereby mixing black and white people in his list of acknowledged standards of male beauty to talk about someone less beautiful in a quasi-dysphemistic manner. However, in line with his racial pride and Black Nationalism, it is insulting for him that a white boy knows more about Martin Luther King Jr. than his own son, which he describes as “an embarrassment” (1x12).

Negative judgment also appears. Dre uses quasi-dysphemism to criticize how his child modifies or changes his name to fit in with white or Jewish standards—“So, Junior, if I hear anybody calling you [Jewish] *Schlomo* or *Shmuel* or especially [white] *Andy*, I’m gonna back you over, and whoever else is saying it, in my car” (1x01; italics added)—without realizing his child is just searching for his own voice in the midst of adolescence. Negative ideas revolve around not being black enough in the sense of not having the required customs or knowledge of black culture. He himself is included in the criticism, since he recognizes he knows many black people, but apparently does not know his own children. He also criticizes his wife through dysphemistic terms for being biracial when he introduces her to the audience as “this drooling, pigment-challenged, mixed-race woman [...] my wife, Rainbow” (1x01). Dre wants to discredit her opinion as not belonging to a real black woman and does so by using politically correct terminology which is shockingly artificial. She rejects both those expressions and the distinction between the black and the not-so-black by alluding to her unambiguously black appearance:

(6) “All this coming from, uh, a biracial or mixed or omni-colored-complexion, whatever-it-is-they’re-calling-it-today woman—who technically isn’t even really black?”  
 “Okay, well, if I’m not really black, then could somebody please tell my hair and my ass?”  
 (1x01)

However, Dre repeatedly resents Pops’s accusation that he does not eat a real black diet: “Oh, so fried, fried chicken is too black for you” (1x01). He also considers it an

insult to their culture when his son wants to play a sport typically played by white people, field hockey. When his wife tries to counter his exaggeration by using hyperbole, he reprimands her for blaming O. J. Simpson, the celebrity who was acquitted just because of the color of his skin, as is said to be typically the case with whites:

(7) “Babe, you don’t get it. Today, it’s field hockey. Tomorrow, he’s running from the police in a white bronco.”

“Oh, my God are you suggesting that our son is gonna grow up and murder his wife?”

“Aha! You think O. J. did it!”

“Oh, come on.” (1x01)

Racial tags are sometimes used by Dre to refer to his wife—“Mixed Bow, Asian Maisie, and Black Lance” (1x19)—as well as his mother. (1x10). Jokes are even made about white identity when Dre is playing the dozens with his colleagues: “You so white, Wayne Brady’s jealous,” “You so white, you thought Malcolm X was a porno,” “You so white, ghosts are scared of you,” and “Yeah, man, you don’t look like the inside of Conan O’Brien’s thigh” (1x15).

There are also many references to Mexicans, understood as a community of their own. Dre, and even Bow, substitute expressions applied to food for the word *Mexican* to describe a woman he daydreams of: “that nice little burrito girl who gives them extra guacamole” and “[y]ou want me to choke to death so that you can get with Chipotle girl?” (1x18). Dre uses Spanish to mock Mexicans and attributes certain, less socially acceptable jobs to them. Once again, this can also be applied to the agreeable Bow, who puts her foot in it when trying to clarify a misunderstanding with her neighbor and then feels she is offending the Latino gardener: “I’m still a doctor! Janine, I am not just a gardener! Oh, Pedro, I’m so sorry” (1x07). Dre employs the dysphemistic expression “damn Mexican” with an offensive intention and justifies his words as “totally acceptable” when he angrily refers to a colleague who “robbed” him the role of Santa (1x10). He has two reasons to deride her for not being the right candidate: she is a woman and she is Mexican. This opinion is partly supported by his family, who claim “there’s supposed to be a black Santa before a Mexican Santa.” They create their own Chain of Being for human history and argue the order for Presidency should be white President, black President, Mexican President, gay President; therefore, the order for Santa should be “white Santa, black Santa, Mexican Santa, Thunderdome” (1x10), which suggests the world will never be ready for more changes beyond the integration of Latinos. Even though Dre tries to offend with statements like these, he ends up recognizing that they are racist and insane.

Prejudices and stereotypes are also applied to other ethnicities, nationalities or geographical identities, such as Canadians and Europeans. In fact, Dre displays inverted racism towards people of a different origin. Europeans, for instance, are depicted as depraved and obsessed with sex. He is especially offensive with the French, as his wife



affirms: “the French thing has overtaken the white thing on your list of stupid reasons to freak out,” she says when their daughter is dating someone French and Dre is worried about them having sex.

Even though Dre distinguishes between white Americans and white Canadians, he still criticizes how whites in general conceive black people in terms of stereotypes. He complains because he is frequently asked if he knows Jay-Z, responding that “all black people don’t know one another” (1x16). This would imply reductionism and that they are a minority. However, this is mitigated as his interlocutor asks if he knows RuPaul, which he actually does.

Apart from emphasizing his black nationalistic feelings by “looking for more black friends” for his son (1x03) or alluding to representatives or symbols of black people like Whoopi Goldberg in *The Color Purple* (1985) or Oprah Winfrey, Dre resorts to euphemistic metaphors to define how black people have progressed despite the impediments posed by white people throughout history. Thus, he tells his daughter that “some species flourish in any environment” (1x03). Dre also uses a euphemistic expression to denounce how white people have always discredited black people in both senses of the expression—“to put it mildly, credit hasn’t always been the easiest thing for a black man to get, whether it’s a credit-card application, the birth of rock ‘n’ roll, or civilization itself” (1x04).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

While meeting the standards for family sitcoms addressing the difficult task of parenthood, *Black-ish* is mainly about being black and middle-class in the United States in the twenty-first century. Racial tensions are portrayed as a major preoccupation for Black America in terms of issues ranging from professional glass ceilings to the so-called misappropriation of black culture, especially in the music industry, as well as more serious questions like the persistence of open racism. Every episode reflects topics relevant to current society from various perspectives within the black community, who generally enjoy better life conditions while attempting not to forget the slavery of their ancestors and confronting subtler yet persistent forms of discrimination. Even if the NAACP has appreciated this approach, the series has also provoked controversy, with some voices accusing it of displaying inverted racism.

The tensions appearing in the series are reflected in numerous linguistic resources concerning taboo and friendly banter or playing the dozens. Humor is not used to either confirm or reject the stereotypes set by a dominant outgroup majority, but rather to provide, from the inside, a space where different ways of understanding blackness are confronted. There is, firstly, the perspective of those who are blackish, whose position is, in some way, prone to assimilation. This is the viewpoint of Dre’s wife and children, who feel both inside the black community and not discriminated against by the whites, leading them to truly believe in color blindness or the eventual overcoming of racial



obstacles, although occasionally they feel rejected by both communities. Secondly, the real black perspective is represented by Pops. It fights active white oppression and aims for separation. Its implicitly exaggerated representation in the show has not been understood by some sectors of the audience, hence the accusations of reverse racism. Thirdly, the option of full integration is propounded by Dre himself, who perceives clear color lines in his office and, through his many insecurities, consistently reveals his wish for integration and his dislike of marginalizing black stereotypes. Finally, marginalization, understood as the acceptance of the white prejudices shared by Dre's colleagues, white or not.

There is, however, some agreement in the show on the preference for the term *black* from among other alternatives. In fact, being neutral in meaning, the word acquires the implications the speaker gives it and, since black people have associated it with desirable qualities, there is no longer any need for taboo expressions (affect). Some other words or metaphors are intrinsically dysphemistic and must be avoided, even in the ingroup, although there are some members who do not seem to be aware of this. Under the guise of not being racist, dysphemism is used to negatively characterize other ethnic groups, like whites or Mexicans, whom Dre perceives as rivals (judgment). This antithetical conception of the United States is shown through a persistent use of polarization as a linguistic resource which confronts "us" and "them," whereby everything concerning black culture is positive (appreciation) and endangered. Despite everything, the story of the Johnsons is one of success and getting on in life. And, as Dre himself says, "point is, there is a story to tell, the story of us, our family, our culture. The details of the story might change over time, but the important thing is, *we* tell it" (1x24; italics added).

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