

The case against

[In the July 11 & 18th 2016 issue of the *The New Yorker*](#), Kelefa Sanneh discusses two controversial words: 'ghetto' and 'gentrification'. They are contentious for different but related reasons. On the one hand, each one captures something of political and emotional conflicts around city areas and their populations. On the other hand, these conflicts are partly due to the ambiguous meaning of those very words and to incompatible values associated with districts and their inhabitants.

Is a ghetto something to defend and be proud of, since it indicates a special historical site for a group? Or is it a word to be abhorred and avoided, due to its association with discrimination and murder? Is gentrification a name for the unfair displacement of poor original populations and the loss of the spirit they brought to a locality? Or is it a sign of improvements in built and social fabrics?

The article is of interest for the philosophy of language because it combines ideas about why linguistic signs matter and how they come to fail. In politically charged cases, language makes a difference by expressing a point of contention accurately and by indicating what it refers to. However, according to theories of signification (both structuralist and analytic) signs cannot accomplish this if the expression is confused or the indication ambiguous. In the first case, meaning breaks down and the challenge escapes us. In the second, reference fails and the discussion lacks truthfulness.

The threat of ambiguity and imprecision can be understood through Harry G. Frankfurt's acute and amusing analysis of bullshit as 'indifference to how things really are'.² When language is made to depart from how things are, we lose truth and fail to 'describe reality correctly'.³ As such, for Frankfurt, 'bullshit is a greater enemy of truth than lies are.'⁴

The structuralist requirement for accurate relations between well-identified terms can be grasped through Hjelmslev's definition of the sign as a function between two 'functives'. The sign is a bringing together of expression and content functives, something that works as an expression and something that works as a content: 'There will never be a sign function without the simultaneous presence of both these functives.'⁵

¹ This is my position paper from the October 2016 meeting on Japanese philosophy held at Tallinn University. I am grateful to the participants and the organiser, Rein Raud, for their hospitality, helpful comments and learned papers on Japanese philosophy and culture, and many other subjects.

² Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005, p 34

³ *On Bullshit*, p 56

⁴ *On Bullshit*, p 61

⁵ Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, Trans. F. J. Whitfield, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961, p 48

The problem with 'ghetto' is that it expresses good associations (*life in common in the ghetto*) and bad ones (*trapped and vulnerable in a ghetto*). For the content, ambiguity is about value: the ghetto is seen as positive and negative. In the expression, failure is about inconsistent images for the same place. These diverge around what a ghetto looks like now. The clash of images is, for instance, between cherished historical origins, places of belonging, aspirational locations, and areas of incarceration, poverty and murder.

Sanneh's discussion is a balanced study of disagreements around words and of the difficulties caused by the splitting and debasement of linguistic signs. We learn about important changes occurring in our cities while absorbing a wider lesson in the philosophy of language. *New Yorker* pieces frequently involve this combination of historical study, critical analysis and progressive politics.

For that approach and for the background theories supporting it, the critical examination of signs participates in beneficial progress. Its justification can be traced back to Orwell and the aim of bias-free language, but it reaches much further back, to the search for correct meaning in Socratic dialogues and to the demand for accuracy of argument in classical rhetoric.

This moral and political linguistic discipline is returning to prominence in our so-called 'post-truth' world. The use of ambiguous, misplaced and vague language by demagogues such as Donald Trump, or in the recent Brexit campaign in the UK, calls for forms of analysis capable of revealing indifference to truth or lies.

As a repost to this drift away from truth, accurate reference and simple senses allow for valid connections between – in simple terms – an actual referent and the sense of an accurate proposition (*You did support the Iraq war; £350 million is a gross rather than net figure*). The proliferation of fact-checking on news sites is a reflection of this turn back to accuracy.

If we use words ambiguously we'll not be able to solve urgent and divisive problems. We'll make them worse. Where some see a ghetto to be modernised others see a home; some understand a home as an investment, others define it as a basic human need. A solution to this division is to base discussions on well-identified referents for clear and agreed terms. Instead of 'ghetto', we should use a proper name (*the new town west of Calderwood*) and accurate data (*this many incomers belonging to this social group*).

The following passage from Sanneh's article shows the challenge posed by ambiguity for a progressive approach to linguistic signs:

As the term spread through academic journals and then the popular press, "gentrification," like "ghetto," became harder to define. At first, it referred to instances of new arrivals who were buying up (and bidding up) old housing stock, but then there was "new-build gentrification." Especially in America, gentrification often suggested white arrivals who were displacing non-

white residents and taking over a ghetto, although, in the case of San Francisco, the establishment of Whitman's so-called "gay ghetto," created as an act of self-protection, was also a species of gentrification. (83)

The solution to this loss of truth is to combine critical analysis and the rectification of language. The symptom of breakdown is that the sign becomes 'hard to define'. The remedy is to make language more precise, or to select a single correct meaning among current ones, in order to allow discussions to be accurate in meaning and referent.

Nevertheless, my view is that this improvement is not possible because it depends on a mistaken explanation of why linguistic signs fail. The 'corrective' explanation assumes that failure depends on ambiguous meanings associated with a referent, or on the lack of an actual referent. The solution is then to select the right meaning for a given referent. But what if the use of a sign is always an intervention on many contradictory meanings and on many interconnected places? What if individual referents and senses are a misrepresentation of the nature of reality?

For example, even if we agree on referents and meanings, it is much harder to remove tangled emotional ties triggered by them. The emotions maintain connections between competing meanings. Even when words are forbidden they can be revived by these connections; for instance, when we realise that a new word is designed to hide an older one (*We are downsizing the workforce*).

There is therefore a contradiction in the corrective approach to language. For the symptom, language is shown to be complex and messy. That's part of its attraction. For the remedy, language is to be corrected by simplification. Sanneh gives a vivid account of different associations of values and images for 'ghetto' and 'gentrification'. These prove to be dynamic and interconnected, in the sense of depending on one another and changing fluidly over time. Why should we believe that a corrected language will prove to be immune from this fluidity once it enters use?

Dynamic relativity means that words are not easily amended without discounting real connections and associations. This is because uses cover multiple and yet irreconcilable positions, such as 'self-protection' and 'displacement' around a gentrified area. An intervention on the right meaning of a term is thus always a political gesture, in the sense of taking a position within an open dispute.

Linguistic correction intervenes upon dynamic relations, but cannot lay claim to a final justification in language for that intervention. This does not mean that we should not intervene, but rather that we should do so on a different basis and with a different aim. We can seek to shape language, but we cannot correct or cure it. We should not seek a pure basis for action in language, but rather always reflect on the political context of any attempt to shape it.

Complex associations and meanings are resistant to conflation into a single agreed line. The solution of banning an offending term can push it and its political associations underground, or stops a real wrong or claim from being expressed. Counterintuitively, the use of proper names and objective observations

to achieve a reasonable accommodation can add to the political force of the words that disappear from accepted lexicons, because the words capture something that a given objective account elides.

The critical and corrective position can be summed up in the following norms, added to the idea that linguistic signs belong to referential systems that evolve between static states when signs are swapped in and out:

- Signs should have a reliable referent
- Signs should have a clear and objective meaning
- A sign should bring a referent and meaning together truthfully
- A progressive approach to language should discard signs that fail the tests of reference, meaning and accurate association

I accept that the norms could form the basis for a consistent approach to signs in a limited context. I also accept that such an approach fits the aim of an objective approach to language, combined with the ability to purify it over time and in practice. However, the principles and definitions they rely upon give a false picture of how signs always work in wider and conflicted environments.

Against my view and returning to Frankfurt's study of bullshit, does this commit me to an anti-realist doctrine and lead me to 'undermine confidence in the value of disinterested efforts to determine what is true and what is false, and even in the intelligibility of the notion of objective inquiry.'?⁶ In response to this accusation, I hope to show that truth can be viewed differently, rather than undermined, when ideas of disinterested efforts and objectivity are brought into question.

In response to Hjelmslev, I will argue that taking process and dynamic change as primary does not render ideas of linguistic state and structure impossible, thereby abandoning any hope of a consistent understanding of language.⁷ It is rather that imposing state and structure on language to the exclusion of underlying processes introduces a mistaken picture of how language works.

The disagreement is then not about a progressive stance in the philosophy of signs and language. It is about its basis. If we begin with a misrepresentation of how signs work, then our attempts at reform will fail, because they will be out of step with actual language use. This does not mean that it is impossible to achieve progressive change through language. It means that the tools need to be different.

Signs never work through static relations between well-identified terms but through dynamic and multiple relations that transform elements, understood as permeable neighbourhoods rather than well-defined identities. The sign is always ongoing and multiple process. The philosophy of signs should

⁶ *On bullshit*, p 65

⁷ Louis Hjelmslev, *Language: an Introduction*, Trans F. J. Whitfield, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1970, pp 132-3

therefore offer a formal model that allows us to connect to and explain how a sign brings changing relations and elements together.

We need models for multiple and dynamic processes in signs. We shouldn't seek to determine how signs ought to work as abstract individuals. Instead, we must find ways to deploy the creative and critical potential of signs in contexts that change with them. A word is a persistent problem within an environment, rather than a piece that can be discarded and replaced without cost.

The case for

Alternative definitions of difference are a good way of understanding the opposition between a static theory of the sign and a process one. The article on ghettos and gentrification draws different and separate positions around each word and the ideas they conjure up. The positions are organised around contradictory propositions, such as 'gentrification is bad for original populations' and 'gentrification improves an area'. Static means that for a given period the positions do not overlap or change. They determine independent claims over a linguistic sign and its referent. These are incompatible and lead to ambiguity if they are taken together or confused.

This is a discrete version of difference. The positions taken around signs are independent of one another and together they form a structure with separate nodes. We cannot bring them together without committing ourselves to the kind of failed reference and muddled sense to be avoided in clear and precise discussions of problems.

However, there is another way of understanding difference that I'll call continuous and intensive. In this version, difference is not about separation. On the contrary, every position merges into all others and differences are a matter of intensive degrees. Cutting these intensive positions apart in order to achieve discrete categories leads to a false picture, since positions can only be distinguished relatively by degrees of intensity (more or less, closer or further apart).

These degrees are themselves relational and qualitative; they connect the positions according to changing qualities (more of this, closer to that). For this intensive version of difference, we do not have categories, like a filing cabinet, but rather a fluid intermingling, like oils mixing continuously on the surface of a pool and reflecting shades of colours.

The discrete approach to difference depends on static representations of the fields they apply to. For a given period, the world is given as a list or structure of individuals that correspond to expressions or senses. For a moment at least, positions in linguistic systems must be defined as separate and unchanging.

In the continuous and intensive approach, static structures are replaced by multiple continuous and intensive relations. Instead of a correspondence between static elements, there is a correspondence between a mode of determination and an ongoing process. The mode is a way to name the process and give it relative determinacy. This can be done, for example, by naming some features of a process of emergence. *A figure of eight shape is appearing among them.*

Take a meeting about gentrification in a city hall. According to the static model, the different positions held by the persons present can be divided into a structure of claims about a location. There are categories of people defined by the propositions they hold about a place, such as for or against gentrification, or belonging or not belonging to the original inhabitants of a given district.

For the dynamic model, the naming of a group at the meeting is only the occasion for the description of multiple changes in degrees of emotion, belief, attachment, gesture and commitment to claims. Instead of a relation between structures, there are diagrams of complex and continuous transformations which do not correspond to individual propositions, people or places.

For instance, each partner from a couple on the same side of the debate has subtly different ways of responding to live arguments. When challenged, the intensity of their emotions, and the reasons and images behind them, varies across a multiplicity of things and directions. *It still makes me sad to see it go and even sadder that you don't feel it too.*

To make relative sense of this multiplicity we have to name some of the directions, such as 'tending to side with local values', but we should only do this to draw out a change in intensity across areas, rather than to define a final position. I have suggested [elsewhere](#) that this means we should understand political affects such as anger as distributed across complex and mixed fields, rather than situated somatically or located according to a model of the individual mind.

The distinction between categorical and intensive difference is the basis for a response to the 'case against' presented in the previous section. The case depends on a static and clear separation between different referents and meanings, or between different expressions and contents (note that this point can be put in terms of logic, for instance, between Aristotelian and non-standard logics with no law of excluded middle). It therefore also depends on the repudiation of interconnected and mobile multiplicities.

My response to this rigid vision rests on the following arguments:

- Signs cannot have a reliable static indication, because they are processes of multiple transformations and therefore correspond to interrelated and shifting indications
- Signs do not have a single clear and objective meaning, since they bring together differing degrees of relations between competing claims and between permeable, dynamic and interconnected elements understood better as overlapping neighbourhoods

- A sign cannot be a single connection between an indication and meaning, or content and expression, because each sign is a bringing together of many elements, intensive relations and transformations in a dynamic and open collection
- It is misleading to advocate the 'reject and replace' progressive model for failing signs, since any new sign is multiple and remains in continuous process with the rejected items
- Signs do not belong to a static system that evolves by swapping in and out signs, because each sign is an intervention in a process transforming all other signs and the elements they transform.

The process model for signs as response to static models

Counter to static models for linguistic signs, a process philosophy of linguistic signs can be understood as responding to three critical questions raised against process and one subsidiary question generated by the relation of process signs to science and to claims based on laws and codes opposed to process:

1. How do you identify a process sign?
2. How do you show ongoing and multiple processes?
3. How do you reflect the speculative aspect of this identification and showing?
4. (subsidiary question) How do you take account of positions that deny the process account?

Each of these questions comes with a technical difficulty:

1. How do you identify a sign *without defining it as a limited and static relation*?
2. How do you show *all* the processes?
3. Are there limits to speculation and, if not, is it *without norms*?
4. (subsidiary difficulty) *Who decides* which counter-positions to take account of?

The solution proposed in my process philosophy of signs is to define the sign as a process of selection. A sign is the selection of a set against a background, where the elements of the set and the background are transformed by the selection. This leads to the definition of the sign – its name – as a set of elements {a, b, c, ...} but where the name is a token for an ongoing process to be mapped by series of speculative diagrams. Choosing to include the word 'ghetto' in a sign is to trigger a process of transformation across the set and its background, and to invite a series of diagrams describing the effect of that selection.

For example, in a gaffe recently committed by the chair of the UK Office for Standards in Education. David Hoare, sought to explain low educational standards on the Isle of Wight by stating that the Isle was a 'poor' 'white' 'ghetto' suffering from 'inbreeding'. As usual in such cases, where damage limitation and accusations vie for front of scene, debates focused on what he meant or intended and what he was supposedly referring to, or failing to refer to.

As process sign, though, the gaffe is seen differently and independently of intended meanings. The words used by David Hoare led to a selected sign {Isle of Wight, inbreeding, white, poor, bad education results} which itself drew out of and transformed a wider background. To understand the political and linguistic effect of his words, we shouldn't simply consider intentions and facts. We should also map the interactions of the sign through a much wider background.

Once the sign has been named through its selected set, the art of the process model is therefore to draw up a diagram of the intensive effects of that selection. The diagram is how you show multiple processes. Its form is not determined, since it is a way of showing changes in and around elements, directions of increases and decreases, of closeness and intensity, and relations of distance and influence between elements.

Like a commentary on a wrestling match, we can draw the moves, but we can also describe them, give analogies for them, or metaphors and parallels. What's important is that the broad, dynamic and intense relations are conveyed. For example, irrespective of intended meaning and reference, one such direction and change in intensity might be greater defensiveness on the Isle. Another might be a decrease in confidence among its young (an appalling achievement for the chair of OFSTED).

To reflect the speculative and perspectival aspects of each diagram, they must be seen as members of a suite comprising competing suggestions. This means that each sign becomes an opportunity for a creative and critical intervention in the exchange and coining of signs. We are given a picture of an intense process; a process that matters and that cannot be 'wished away' by introducing new signs, since these will also set off new processes.

Finally, there will be many counter views that deny either the selection of the sign, or some of its diagrams, or even all of them. These are stipulations over the sign. For them a further process is required, a dialogue between the claims of the selection and diagram and counter account of elements, processes and functions of the sign given by, for example, objective models or those of a given science.

James Williams, Edinburgh, October 2016

Coda: a simple account of my spoken paper at the meeting on Japanese philosophy in Tallinn for an Estonian newspaper:

My paper followed from my recent book *A Process Philosophy of Signs* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016). In the book I argue that a process sign is named through a selected set; for example, {T, bully, control freak} could be the set for a simple sign identifying someone as a bully and a control freak. The art of the process model is then to draw up a diagram of the intensive effects of that selection; that is, how the sign changes intensities of relations, such as increasing relief for those who see the bully named

and decreasing power of the control freak. The diagram is how you show multiple processes. Its form is not determined, since it is a way of showing changes in and around elements. The main thing is to show that the sign is an ongoing process, rather than a static connection. Like a commentary on a wrestling match, we can draw the moves, but we can also describe them, give analogies for them, or metaphors and parallels. What's important is that the broad dynamic and intense relations are given.