“What Is in a Name?”: “Illegal Pete’s” and the Normalization of Violence Against Mexicans in the United States

Sophie S. Alves
University of Arizona, Tucson, USA

On December 2015, a new restaurant opened next to the University of Arizona campus, in Tucson. Its name was “Illegal Pete’s” and it sold Mexican food. One would have expected it to be a welcomed and thriving business in a city where 42.1% of the population is Hispanic. However, the very presence of this establishment led to an intense backlash from several University of Arizona (UA) students, who started a campaign that called either for the change of the restaurant’s name or for the shutting down of the restaurant altogether. What began as a campus-centered actions soon became a wider-spread controversy, which drew the attention of various media sources—both television and written newspapers—as well as of social media. This then turned into a violent discussion between those defending the owner’s right to choose any name for his restaurant and those outraged by the implications of the choice of such a name in a state like Arizona, where Mexican immigrants are discriminated against and portrayed as “illegals” who have violated the nation state laws by crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without proper documentation.

Even though the owner of the restaurant was adamant about the fact that the name of his establishment was not problematic and was just a “word” or a “name”—thus implying it could not possibly negatively impact people of Mexican descent—his opponents vigorously insisted on the fact that such a word had multiple meanings—thus indicating that, while the word illegal was inconsequential for the owner, for many Tucson students, some of whom were not part of MEChA or of Mexican-descent. They were also joined by professors and community members.
residents it was attached to anti-immigrant sentiments. How does the name of a restaurant suddenly become the catalyst of animated discussions about race?

In order to provide the beginning of an answer to that question, I will first reflect on the construction of “illegality”, its meaning and its consequences on lived experiences. Then I will draw on Bakhtin’s analysis of words and his concepts of “single-voiced” and “double-voiced” discourses to show that people interpret words based on their own life experiences, the environment they evolve in, and the political climate. Finally, I will examine how the use of the word “illegal” perpetuates and normalizes discrimination, criminalization, and racism towards Mexican immigrants.

This work relies on newspaper articles that can be found online and are thus accessible by all. It also quotes some comments found on the ABC15 Arizona Facebook page as a response to an article published online. The purpose here is not to analyze all the comments found on that page; neither is it to be exhaustive, nor to provide a definite answer to the debate over the name of this restaurant. Instead, this work aims at opening the door for a deeper discussion on the debate over the term *illegal* and why it can be perceived as a way of normalizing violence towards Mexicans in the United States. The purpose is thus to highlight how the struggle over one word is in reality a struggle of different voices and different points of view. In that sense, the hope here is to participate in the development of a better understanding of the significance of the name “Illegal Pete’s” in a city like Tucson.

**The Construction of “Mexican Illegality” in the United States**

The contemporary immigration regime at the U.S.-Mexico border has been associating undocumented Mexican immigrants, criminality, and illegality to the point that Mexican individuals—regardless of their actual status—are in many ways excluded from U.S. society because they are perceived as the embodiment of illegality. This negatively impacts their lived experiences as it prevents them from fully belonging to the nation and it thus leads them to feel anxious as they fear being deported and separated from their loved ones.

**When Mexicans Become the Embodiment of Illegality**

Illegality in the United States must be examined as a moral status whereby Mexican immigrants are constructed as “criminals” and thus immoral individuals who do not respect the law as they cross the U.S.-Mexico border without proper documentation. Anthropologist Jonathan Inda explains that “a crime fighting agenda has increasingly come to determine the priorities of the immigration system” (Inda, 2013, p. 295) which is facilitated by the widespread use of the term *illegal* to refer to undocumented people.

Politicians, anti-immigrant advocates, and the mainstream media overuse the term *illegal* which was popularized in the 1970s and associated with Mexican immigrants:

> the labels illegal/undocumented migrants have come largely associated with Mexican-origin persons and their possible “unlawful” entry and created a near-synonym between the concept of “illegal/undocumented immigrant/alien” and Mexican migrant. Together, they have contributed to the making of the nation’s “immigration problem” a Mexico-centered problem; fostered the illegalization of Mexican migrants; and correspondingly, constructed Mexican migrants as the population threatening the nation’s sovereignty. (Plascencia, 2009, p. 383)

The constant exposure to the issue of immigrant illegality through the media has led to a rise in public concern about the “Latino Threat” (Chavez, 2013). In that sense, the word *illegal* is a “dominant political signifier” (Plascencia, 2009, p. 375). It carries a heavy significance regarding what could be perceived as the
“Reconquista” of the nation, in other words the alleged plans by Mexican immigrants to reconquer the U.S. Southwest, territories that had pertained to Mexico before the Texas annexation (1845) and the Mexican Cession (1848), as a consequence of the Mexican-American War (Huntington, 2004).

Chavez argues that the discourse broadcast by the media leads to claims that citizenship should not be granted to some people, calling into question some people’s membership to the nation, as they represent a danger. According to him, the “Latino Threat Narrative” (Chavez, 2013, p. 3) is conveyed through media spectacles such as news reports, published articles, or online debates. The media alternates between a stereotypical portrayal of Mexican immigrants and a focus on problems of “illegal” crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border. This positions Mexican immigrants as “threatening” (Chavez, 2013, p. 77) and “dangerous, pathological, abnormal” (Chavez, 2013, p. 75) compared to previous immigrants, hence the nationalist concerns towards border surveillance and fears of “browning of America” (Chavez, 2013, p. 87).

Language, narratives, and discourses are sites of power (Santa Ana, 2002). Public discourse about immigrants is a key site for the production of a nationalistic fear concerning racial extinction and the possibility of a change in the complexion of the country. These fears are not new, since each new immigrant group had to face those claims about them, especially in times of economic crisis. However, it seems that in the case of Mexican migrants the fear is amplified compared to previous immigrant groups. Those immigrants are generally perceived as the epitome of “bad migrants”, because they ignore the “rule of law” by illegally crossing the border. Consequently, they are constructed as distinctly “illegal” and thus distinctly “bad” compared to other groups of immigrants. Yet, their presence is controlled in terms of criminal laws. They are discriminated against in immigration laws and constantly risk being deported. The risk of deportation reinforces the idea that the United States controls who can come in and who needs to be thrown out of the country (De Genova, 2004).

Mexican immigrants are a vulnerable and disposable workforce because of “deportability”. “Deportability” is the state of being liable to deportation, in other words, the risk of being removed from a country. Indeed, there is a constant threat of deportation that aims at creating a disciplinary mechanism in the production of Mexican immigrant “illegality” and the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. The increasing use of deportation as an enforcement and management tactic reinforces the development of fear among immigrants. The spectacle of workplace raids results in more isolation for undocumented immigrants who avoid being too visible by getting out of their home. The simple possibility of having one of their family members deported is a source of important stress for children (De Genova, 2002).

In that sense, “illegality is produced on a societal level” (Solis, 2003, p. 16) and leads to the creation of a liminal space or a space of nonexistence. Mexican immigrants and their family members must make themselves invisible as they are excluded from social and legal spaces they cannot safely navigate. Consequently, they have to deal with feelings of anxiety.

Anxious Belonging

Anxiety informs who belongs and who does not which creates a “social and political life of anxiety” (Middleton, 2013, p. 609). A restaurant whose name includes the word illegal and which sells Mexican food will be a daily reminder for those who pass by the restaurant that Mexican descent individuals’ belonging to the U.S. nation is precarious at best. In that sense, Mexican descent people experience “collective states of fear, anxiety, desire, and crisis” (p. 609) as they seek but are denied their place in the nation-state.
Anthropologist Middleton (2013) explains that a constant and collectively felt fear of being excluded from the nation state creates various forms of political action, violence, resistance, and desires for separation as the “otherized” group witnesses “various forms of structural exclusion and periodic bouts of ethnic cleansing and violence” (p. 609). The members of the otherized group have a shared conscience of political repercussions, historical and cultural trauma. Their sense of vulnerability is socially experienced since the uncertainty of their belonging triggers anxiety. They are thus “vulnerable to a range of both real and imagined threats” (p. 612). The word illegal triggers that very anxiety. It is a reminder of the fact that Mexican immigrants are not welcome on U.S. soil, that they are additions to the nation but do not belong. Naming a restaurant that sells Mexican food “Illegal Pete’s” cannot be neutral, especially in Arizona. The word in itself is harmless in its essence, but its use is not. Hence the controversy and the protests are around the name of the restaurant.

UA students are fighting against that word because it has repercussions on people’s lives, because there is historical and cultural trauma. In that sense, anxious belonging is best understood as a historically produced, “socially experienced phenomenon” (p. 611) that is fueled by the anticipation and projection of a state which constitutes a potentially-imagined materialization of the fear of being deported which is felt in the community: “He is obviously not brown”, Cynthia Diaz said. “He’s not Mexican, but he is selling burritos mission style, which I don’t know what that is. That’s not Mexican” (Salzwedel, 2015).

This statement from Diaz—a UA student and a member of MEChA—sheds light on this feeling of anxious belonging as she starts by saying that Turner is “not brown” therefore differentiating herself from him and emphasizing her feeling of exclusion from a more privileged and dominant group that she associates him with. She further marks this difference by adding that he is “not Mexican” and thus cannot understand how hurtful the word illegal can be and how it can trigger feelings of anxiety every time a person of Mexican descent passes in front of his restaurant. Her association between “brown”, “Mexican”, “border”, and “hurt” reinforces this idea of anxious belonging. It shows that her “community” and her “people” are excluded from the U.S. nation-state and marked as different by the very existence of a restaurant with such a name.

Tucson is so close to the border that this word cannot be neutral. In that sense, Diaz argues that when Mexican descent people see the name “Illegal Pete’s” they cannot be passive and not react. This name will automatically trigger a response in them and will lead to a strong reaction that will only reflect the intensity of their feelings about the word and its impact. Turner cannot “take the listener for a person who passively understands but not for one who actively answers and reacts” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280). The protests stemmed from a long history of discrimination and injustice, from a long history of structural and cultural violence: “every utterance is oriented toward this apperceptive background of understanding, which is not a linguistic background but rather one composed of specific objects and emotional expressions” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 281).

The “emotional expressions” mentioned by Bakhtin are precisely what led to this controversy about the name of the restaurant. The linguistic aspect of the word or its essence is not enough. Focusing on the word itself as Turner and his supporters do prevents them from understanding the struggle. Their argument is thus less strong than they can imagine because “To some extent, primacy belongs to the response” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 282). Following that idea, UA students’ response has “primacy” because they are able to see the different layers that the word “illegal” endorses. Overall, the backlash over the name of Turner’s restaurant is based on a struggle between single-voiced discourse and double-voiced discourse.
“What Is in a Name?”

Following Romeo’s claim in one of Shakespeare’s most famous plays Romeo and Juliet (1597)—“What’s in a name? that which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet”—Pete Turner, the owner of “Illegal Pete’s” argues that the word illegal is just a word, and that it only has one meaning which is in no way subject to interpretation. On the other hand, UA students and their supporters defend the idea that words can “hurt”, and that it is crucial to take into consideration and acknowledge the context and location in which a word is used. So, “what’s in a name?”

Turner’s Position: A Single-Voiced Discourse?

According to Pete Turner, “Illegal Pete’s” is a franchise, the first of which was opened 24 years ago. The name is a reference to his father—whose name was “Pete”—and to the name of a bar in one of his favorite novels. He thus does not understand the backlash that keeps arising concerning the name of his restaurant as he “did not mean to come in and create controversy” (Sayers, 2015). He adds that the name aims at drawing potential customer’s attention as well as creating a sense of mystery and adventure that would lead people to enter his restaurant to discover what is so special about it. In that sense, he firmly believes that the name is not problematic since his intention was not to negatively impact Tucson Mexican-origin residents. Moreover, he insists that when he chose the name he was not thinking about immigrants, and consequently, he did not see why anybody would make that connection.

Indeed, he adds that “where I am right now, I just know that this is not at all what (the name) means. It’s all about me, not illegal immigrants” (Sayers, 2015). By saying this, Turner implies that a word has a life of its own. It exists within its own boundaries. He suggests that speakers have the right to claim the ultimate meaning of their words. Therefore, when he uses the word illegal, he believes that everybody should be in accordance with him about what the word means. In that sense, the Bakhtinian concept of “single-voiced discourse” is useful as it helps understand Turner’s argument according to which the name of his restaurant is neutral.

In that perspective, Morson and Emerson (1990) explain that “single-voiced discourse” is based on the idea that there is one single standpoint, one single objective world, held together by the speaker’s voice:

Specifically, discourse of the first type is “direct,” “unmediated,” and “referentially oriented” in that it “recognizes only itself and its object, to which it strives to be maximally adequate” (PDP, pp. 186-7). The speaker says what he wants to say as if there were no question that his way of saying it will accomplish his purpose, and that there could be no other equally adequate way. (p. 149)

“Truth” is then constructed abstractly and systematically from the speaker’s perspective. The listener’s ability to produce autonomous meaning is denied. Only the speaker can be right. This leads to the creation of a discursive impenetrable wall which stops any other perspective from being expressed. Other meanings are unheard and unrecognized. They simply do not exist:

Discourse that has become an object is, as it were, itself unaware of the fact, like the person who goes about his business unaware that he is being watched; objectified discourse [consequently] sounds as if it were direct single-voiced discourse. (p. 149)

Consequently, Turner seems to indicate through his argumentation that the word illegal has become his own word. Since he had no intention to refer to Mexican immigrants, then the word does not refer to that group of people. Any other understanding of the name of his restaurant is “unfair” (Salzwedel, 2015). The word
illegal has become an “object” and Turner “is unaware of the fact” that there are opposing forces at work within that single word:

Speakers of “direct, unmediated discourse” also do not take into account the already-spoken-about quality of the object or, at least, not in a way that implicitly challenges the authority of their own speech. They speak as if there were no “spectral dispersion” of the word; they simply name their referent. (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 148)

Based on this idea, Turner appears to refuse to acknowledge that his words are not his own because words are always in response to other words. They have an “already-spoken-about quality”. Turner seems to firmly believe that a word or an “utterance”—to use Bakhtin’s language—is always an abstract unit of language that is not directed at anyone and, as a result, has no negotiable communicative value or intersubjectively produced meaning. This belief is reaffirmed in the following email response Turner sent to his opponents:

The word is illegal—no s, no additional descriptors or inferences and is meant to suggest counterculture, different, exciting, and mysterious. It in no way references any particular person or group of persons and shouldn’t be interpreted as such. It references me, Pete. It’s typically the countercultural places in our society that are the most accepting of individuals from all different walks of life and we absolutely subscribe to tolerance, understanding and acceptance. Any interpretation otherwise is a reach and unfair. (Salzwedel, 2015)

This written message brings to light the linguistic struggle taking place in the backlash about “Illegal Pete’s”. Turner starts his message by noting that there is no “s” at the end of the word illegal, thus using grammar to further prove that there was no ill-intention in the choice of that specific word. He then mentions the lack of “additional descriptors or inferences” which lays emphasis on the fact that he is indeed aware that he is participating in a linguistic struggle. He proceeds to explain his thought-process when choosing the name of the restaurant and redirects the blame to his opponents by stating that they “shouldn’t” interpret his words. He adds that giving another meaning than the one he had originally intended to the word illegal is “unfair”. Turner refuses to acknowledge that he does not have complete authority over the word; that as soon as it appeared on the façade of his establishment, he lost control over its meaning. In using single-voicing, Turner’s orientation is principally to himself and to perpetuating his own agenda. He consequently does not engage with concerns of others, namely UA students.

**UA Students: A Double-Voiced Discourse?**

If single-voicing means that the orientation of the speaker relies mainly on the idea of a word that has nothing more than its own context, in contrast, double-voicing relies on the idea that speakers and listeners invoke competing points of view. In that sense, any word has struggle in it. There is no neutral word. Words do not belong to anyone. The word illegal does not belong to Turner. Consequently, there is what Turner thinks he is saying when he names his restaurant “Illegal Pete’s” and there is what his potential customers hear when they see the name. Indeed, “the double-voiced word, the sounding of a second voice is part of the project of the utterance” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 149). There is always another layer of meaning to a word.

In that perspective, UA students and their supporters argue against Turner saying that there is no neutral word. They believe that the meaning of a name or utterance only emerges as the latter is determined by a listener. The listener gives meaning to the word as explained by Morson and Emerson (1990):

The listener must not only decode the utterance, but also grasp why it is being said, relate it to his own complex of interests and assumptions, imagine how the utterance responds to future utterances and what sort of response it invites,
evaluate it, and intuit how potential third parties would understand it. Above all, the listener must go through a complex process of preparing a response to the utterance. (pp. 127-128)

To put it differently, a word never belongs to a speaker alone. Language is dead if it is not used in dialogue. Language and words exist among a system of response. They involve at least two parties. In that sense, UA students “decoded” the word *illegal* and understood its meaning within the boundaries of the word itself as a reference to an act that violates the law; they then “grasped” why it was being used in the context of the opening of a restaurant as a branding move meant to draw potential customers’ interest as they would wonder what type of food is sold inside; they “related” it to their “own complex of interests”, in other words immigration, and “assumed” that it was a reference to Mexican undocumented immigrants. They imagined how the word would be used in the future and which associations would be made: illegal immigrants? Mexican illegals? The question then arises as to what this would mean for the Tucson Mexican population. Turner states that he does not connect the word *illegal* to Mexican immigrants and yet that is what UA students immediately understood: How would other people understand the word? Would they equate that to mystery like Turner, or would they connect it to Mexican immigrants and the violation of the law?

Part of the UA students’ argument is based on the idea that the word *illegal* can shift and have a different meaning depending on who uses it and where it is used. A word does not stand on its own; it is not confined “within the boundaries of its own semantic and stylistic contours” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 277). Regardless of Turner’s intentions, the meaning of *illegal* is subject to “the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 277). In that sense, some people will understand the name “Illegal Pete’s” the way Turner intended it to be understood whereas others will give it another meaning:

The word, breaking through to its own meaning and its own expression across an environment full of alien words and variously evaluating accents, harmonizing with some of the elements in this environment and striking a dissonance with others, is able, in this dialogized process, to shape its own stylistic profile and tone. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 277)

The word *illegal* in Tucson “breaks through to its own meaning” and after coming in contact with other words, such as “Mexican”, it “harmonizes” since it makes sense to people that *illegal* would mean “Mexican”, but it also “strikes a dissonance” because UA students are saying that this should not be the case since “No human is illegal” (Ngai, 2006a, p. 291); thus, the connection should not be normalized by naming a restaurant “Illegal Pete’s” (Sayers, 2015).

In that sense, words depend on context as everything in the social world is situated in a specific way. The word *illegal* does not belong to Turner or to UA students; it floats between the two. It has a fluid meaning that changes according to the speaker but also according to the listener. Two customers can go and eat in that restaurant, have the same meal, in the same setting, and yet have a different understanding of the name of the establishment. The word *illegal* is a reference to the violation of the law and thus has its own context, but it is also dependent on other contexts that inform the meaning of the word. This can be seen through Cynthia Diaz’s statement and concerns:

We are so close to the border. We have so many immigrants here in Tucson, Diaz said. It just hurts our community, our people. It makes the people feel uncomfortable and unsafe. And we don’t want that, especially not near the university. (Swazwedel, 2015)

Diaz expresses a fear that because of its presence in Tucson, an hour-and-a-half away from the U.S.-Mexico border, the connection between *illegal* and “Mexican immigrant” will be automatic, especially
since the restaurant sells Mexican food. Following that idea, the word *illegal* is double-voiced as it has the mysterious/edgy quality evoked by Turner, but it is also layered by different other meanings.

In that perspective, words are unfinished and relative. Many voices compete and intermingle in the word *illegal*. The term is not fixed, nor is its meaning. It is double-voiced and not single-voiced as Turner keeps on arguing. Turner thus appears as the centripetal force that moves to consolidate and homogenize the use of the word *illegal* according to his own definition. He creates an authoritative voice that he expects it will not be questioned. UA students and their supporters are the centrifugal force, in other words, the counter force that moves to destabilize and disperse the imposing of one single meaning to the word. In that sense, a word is not just a word.

### A Word Is Not Just a Word

“Double-voicing” is not easy to identify in everyday language because it is highly context-bound. This implies that localized and specific knowledge is necessary to perceive the different layers of the use of a term. In the case of this restaurant, knowing the history and socio-economic as well as political context in which Mexican descent inhabitants evolve in is necessary to begin to understand the reaction it induced in some UA students. Refusing to acknowledge that context is a sign of structural oblivion.

### The Importance of Context

In a letter addressed to Turner, MEChA hints at the importance of context and history to explain why the use of the word *illegal* is not neutral:

> Unlike the state of Colorado, Arizona has legalized racial profiling and criminalization of Brown persons by the state. Senate Bill 1070, passed in 2010, is just one aggression towards brown persons in a series that spans five hundred years; and the use of “illegal” to stigmatize Mexicans, Central Americans, Mexican-Americans, Latina/os, Chicana/os, and other brown persons is just another aggression that continually dehumanizes these communities. (MEChA, 2015)

This paragraph emphasizes the concerns those students have about the name. They are not engaging in a fight about what is politically correct or not, as some opponents have stated (ABC15 Facebook, 2015). They are insisting on the fact that the word *illegal* is highly charged in the Southwest, and even more so in the state of Arizona.

Indeed, several anti-immigrant and discriminatory policies have been implemented in recent years in that state. Those include Senate Bill 1070 as mentioned by UA students. In 2010, the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhood Act, also known as the “Papers Please” law, was the broadest and strictest anti-illegal immigration measure in a long time. It required Arizona inhabitants to have identification documents (identity card/passport) with them at all times. It allowed police officers to inquire about the immigration status of those who had been detained for any other violation. It also called for police in that state to use “reasonable suspicion” to ask for proof of legal status. This in turn allowed officers to arrest someone without a warrant, based on “probable cause” that the individual had committed any type of public offense that would make them subject to deportation.

However, this policy raises several questions, such as: On what criteria can a person be stopped, detained, or arrested? What is “probable cause?” Is that a reference to clothing, attitude, skin-color? As a result, this policy is described as “racial profiling” since the only apparent or physical marker of someone’s immigration
status is their skin color. Thus, immigrants are identified or chosen based on their physical appearance. This is highly problematic because it impacts the lives of Mexican-descent inhabitants who suffer structural as well as cultural violence. Thus, the context or the place in which a word is used does matter:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance, it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the object from the sidelines. (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 276-277)

The word *illegal* used in another state or another country might endorse a different meaning, but it is “a living utterance”. It has “taken meaning and shape” in the 21st century in the United States where anti-immigrant discourses are an everyday reality. Arizona is known as the “police state” and the “anti-immigrant state”, thus *illegal* takes up a particular meaning that cannot be ignored. In that sense, UA students have a “socio-ideological consciousness” around the word as an indicator of criminalization, discrimination, racism, and dehumanization.

Producing the “other” is a daily work that requires the creation of an essentialized category of the “undeserving”. Seeing the name of the restaurant every day, on their way to the university, is damaging to Mexican-descent students because it is a constant reminder of their exclusion from main society and the criminalization of their loved ones. Statements as the following reinforce that naturalization of the word:

It’s illegal Pete’s not illegal pedro’s.

The word illegal only hurts if you are illegal. Cynthia Diaz ... you are a moron. There ... did the word moron bother you?

Well if the word illegal is offensive, then there are a whole bunch of people in prison who are going to be offended. They ended up there because what they did was illegal.

I’m curious. Where does one find racism in the word illegal? Hmmmm....

When I heard “illegal Pete’s” I thought like “dirty drummer” if it was “illegal Juan’s” I could almost see how someone could be offended but come on.... don’t people have enough crisis in their lives to not need to be so sensitive? (ABC15 Facebook, 2015)

The content of those posts dismisses the problematic nature of the term *illegal* and normalizes its use as a neutral term. “Illegal Pete’s” participates in a system of oppression that connects *illegal* with “Mexican”. Yet, those comments make it seem like racism or discrimination happen naturally and cannot be avoided because that is the way the system works. Therefore, the word *illegal* does not create or lead to racism. Racism happens regardless. The word *illegal* is then “common sense” and is not questioned by Turner and his supporters because it is a word like any other. It just states the fact that immigrants violated the law by crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without the proper documentation. It is not problematic because it is a fact. They focus on the practicality of the term and not its subtext.

However, a Bakhtinian analysis helps see that language and words are not neutral. They are socially constructed and used in specific ways and contexts to produce a specific reaction. It is highly doubtful that Turner was unaware of the effect his restaurant would have in a city like Tucson. He names his establishment “Illegal Pete’s” and sells Mexican food. One can thus see the connection that UA students make with their history of discrimination. Customers themselves are likely to make that connection between “illegality” and “Mexican immigrants”.
Structural Oblivion

The backlash surrounding the name “Illegal Pete’s” did not just involve Turner and UA students. People reacted and participated in the linguistic struggle through social media, and notably Facebook (ABC15 Facebook, 2015). Some comments found on the ABC15 Facebook page are used here to provide an example of the type of discursive opposition UA students were exposed to. Several comments were quite violent and showed a lack of understanding about the real issue at stake, namely the impact of the use of the word illegal on Mexican-descent people in Tucson, Arizona. The following comment illustrates this lack of understanding:

The word illegal hurts?? Are you stupid!? First, illegal means something done illegally. Second, “illegal immigrant” is not a hurtful term. Third, the owner isn’t even talking about Latinos, let alone illegal immigrant Latinos. Get the stick out of your butt and grow up. For Christ’s sake! (ABC15 Facebook, 2015)

The beginning of this post highlights how surprised this individual was by the UA students’ reaction regarding the name of the restaurant. They describe those students as “stupid” individuals who are overreacting and rebelling against the owner of a Mexican restaurant over the name of the establishment when they should be in class. The opponent proceeds by giving the generic definition of the word illegal thus reproducing what Turner does by single voicing it. The second argument is that the word is not “hurtful”. Once again, it denies the fact that words do not belong to one single person and the fact that it refracts endlessly as it contains several layers of meaning. The last argument focuses on Turner’s intentions. As mentioned before, just because Turner allegedly did not intend for the word to be linked to Mexicans it does not mean that the association will not be made.

Overall, this post shows that this person—as well as those who make similar comments—is under structural oblivion as they refuse to acknowledge “certain implications of social structure” (McIntosh, 2016, p. 10). Structural oblivion is a concept that relies on the fact that there is a dominant “imagined community” with power that controls the collective conscience, in other words history or what is believed to be true about the past. Here, Turner and his supporters are trying to impose an authoritative definition of the word “illegal” and thus engage in a power struggle through language. Ignoring, erasing, denying, or manipulating the production of common knowledge allows for the perpetuation of violence against an otherized group. In that sense, ignoring the history of discrimination and racism against Mexican-descent people by using the word illegal allows for the perpetuation of cultural violence against this group. Indeed, structural oblivion can only exist if one group of people is excluded and made inferior to the dominant one. UA students’ argument is based on the idea that Mexican descent people are excluded and made inferior by a dominant and privileged group and that the use of the word illegal participates in their structural disadvantage and mistreatment. Ignoring or erasing the implications of the word illegal falls under structural oblivion.

Although she does not refer to linguistic struggles, McIntosh (2016) follows Bakhtin’s concept of perception as she explains that structural oblivion is a subject position:

Structural oblivion is constructed at a variety of scales, ranging from the institutional structuring of information flow (as in, for example, a colonial administration’s whitewashing of its own human rights violations); to collective myths, ideologies, and discourses that skew interpretations of the social world; to psychological mechanisms that surely sometimes include denial and the repression of unpleasantries […] Through structural oblivion, the line between deliberate and unwitting oppression blurs, as elite actors can channel a colonial residue without being fully aware of how it is problematic. (pp. 10-11)
“WHAT IS IN A NAME?”

Following that idea, the word *illegal* participates in the construction of “collective myths, ideologies, and discourses”. Mexican-descent people are not only victims of institutions or administrations, but they are also victims of language. The use of the word *illegal* does impact them, whether it is the speaker’s intention or not. Structural oblivion highlights the ability of privileged people to ignore the perspectives and experiences of those who are oppressed as well as to ignore their role in that ongoing oppression.

Narration, points of origin, and erasures are crucial. Those who wrote negative posts on Facebook not only ignore the structural reasons that led Mexican immigrants to come to the United States, but they also refuse to acknowledge the historical past of the country. Mexican immigrants were presented with limited options after the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed in 1994 between Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Mexican farmers could not compete against U.S. subsidized corn and thus immigrated to the United States in the hopes of finding a job and being able to provide a better life to their family.

The “Bracero Program” (1942-1964) is another example of the role played by the U.S. nation-state on Mexican immigration. This program led to a history of circulating Mexican migrants (generally male) who would easily cross the border to work temporarily and shortly in seasonal jobs and then go back to Mexico. This program benefited both countries: U.S. employers had its surplus labor and Mexican migrants earned extra money without staying too long away from their families.

The following comments thus highlight how people can be under structural oblivion as they do not make the connection between history, politics, and language:

Stand strong Pete Turner! Piss on all these oversensitive bleeding heart crybabies. The notion that the word illegal is offensive is the biggest load of crap I have ever heard and shame on the media for exploiting it.

I’m glad the comments on here are not against the name. It shows that many people still have their head on straight. I will definitely eat at Illegal Petes.

Call me illegal all you want lol.

Honestly it sounds like an old western themed restaurant. This is one of the moments where people take things way too serious.

Ever heard the expression, “This is so good, it should be illegal?” Come on people!! I find it offensive that people can be offended by a word... (ABC15 Facebook, 2015)

All these comments demonstrate once again that words are double-voiced. Some comments refer to the fact that UA students are “oversensitive” as opposed to Turner and his supporters who have “their head on straight” to the point that some even go as far as encouraging others to “call them illegal all they want”. In a nutshell, UA students should not be “offended by a word” because a word is just a word.

However, if the word *illegal* is a joke to some as “it sounds like an old western themed restaurant”, to underrepresented and underprivileged people such as Mexican descent inhabitants, there are structural and daily consequences that go beyond the utterance of the word. In that sense, Bakhtin explains that there is a necessity for an active understanding of a word and the several potential meanings it can have: “a passive understanding of linguistic meaning is no understanding at all, it is only the abstract aspect of meaning” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 281).

Those who commented on that Facebook page have a “passive understanding” of the linguistic meaning of “illegal” and thus have “no understanding at all” of the issue at stake with “Illegal Pete’s”. Their comments minimize the feelings the word and its implications trigger in Mexican descent people.
Conclusion

In conclusion, the backlash over the name “Illegal Pete’s” should not be taken lightly. This is not about a group of students who just want to express extreme feelings and perspectives. This is an issue of political matter. A word is never just a word, especially when it comes to immigration. Several expressions have been circulating freely in society such as “welfare queen”, “illegal”, or “anchor baby”. Those are just some examples of words that have been accepted and normalized even though they objectify and dehumanize human beings. They are now common sense because everybody knows what they mean and what they refer to. However, this does not make them acceptable.

Turner argues that the name of his restaurant is single voiced but by doing that he refuses to acknowledge that words have different layers of meaning and that they can negatively impact people’s lives. Words can “hurt” (Sayers, 2015); they can be detrimental; they can damage. The nonchalant use of certain words can normalize and perpetuate discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment. The word illegal has struggle in it. Denying it is a manifestation of structural oblivion that can only create a feeling of anxious belonging in people of Mexican descent as well as participate and perpetuate violence towards them.

References


