

Chapter 10

The Neoliberal Colonization of Discourses: Gentrification, Discursive Markets and Zombemes



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Introduction: Towards an Inflation of Discourses Colonized by Neoliberalism

‘Making sense’, ‘engaging users’ or ‘making workers adhere’: such expressions are frequently found in the discourse of business unit managers, coaches and even political figures, while they remain linked to the social impact of human relations. In the world of business and economical rapports, other expressions are to be found, such as ‘philosophy of a project’, ‘problem solving’ or ‘our collaborators’. Such expressions all represent shifts in meaning that are as much surprising as they do raise several questions. During recent years, without being necessarily brought to attention, specific terms and syntactic constructions have been contaminated by semantic transformations that are typical of the neoliberal world we live in – a world we will obviously take the time to define in the present chapter.

This chapter builds a theoretical architecture drawing on several linguistic utterances gathered through online texts (media, social networks or forums, for instance). It exposes a linguistic theory of the neoliberal colonization of discourse and of the way discourse becomes lexically, semantically and pragmatically transformed by neoliberal contaminations of meaning. Discourses, I argue, both carry and create representations; representations themselves also participate in the creation and circulation of discourses. In this perspective, the very nature of a neoliberal colonization of discourse holds the seeds of a specific worldview where meaning becomes softened, free of roughness and trapped in a false consensus where semantic specificities and historical meaning are dissolved in order to produce a dominating discursive ideology.

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Deception and dupery lie within this sense of false consensus, inasmuch as the economic and social world we live in is shaped by an ideology that claims not to be one, but to be based on pragmatic decisions rooted in facts and data. By mimicking depoliticization through specific discourse strategies that will be described in the present chapter, neoliberalism, I argue, is a total form of dupery by design: it shapes both economic and social rapports, influences a certain form of individualism and ultimately shapes our very agency by structuring a world of offer, demand and market consumption. It becomes positioned as an encompassing discourse that aims to tell us what is true and what is real in a seemingly universal manner – especially because it has managed to drive globalization as a holistic process – in order to bias the decisions we are taking.

In order to develop this theory, I will take the time to define neoliberalism as an ideology, colonization as a process and discourse, in order to understand what I define as a progressive gentrification of discursive space – a space that neoliberalism transforms into a market. Moreover, I will introduce the concept of *zombeme*, in order to propose a linguistic definition of discursive utterances that become contaminated by neoliberal principles, relying on stereotypical language and the excessive use of formulas.

Discourse and Neoliberal Markets

The definition of neoliberalism is essential to understanding how linguistic colonization functions within the neoliberal spectrum. Neoliberalism, as a word, is itself widely used to describe political, social and economic phenomena; its very inflation blurs its definition as well as its conceptual impacts. Thus, neoliberalism is somehow used as a synonym for capitalism, although both are really different from each other (Audier 2013) yet triggering the emergence of an epistemological swamp. According to Scribano (2019: 102), neoliberalism as an ideology draws on the sensitive and emotional dimension of the mind and of the body, by directly connecting it to the market economy of capitalism.

Scribano posits neoliberalism as an extension of traditional capitalism that encompasses individual as well as collective preferences, thus drawing on the freedom to choose and to consume within a market defined as the sole reference framework. In other words, neoliberalism works as the functional rationalization of anything that may seem irrational but that is nonetheless valid. In this way, the neoliberal conception of freedom finds its perfect incarnation in the freedom of consumption. I will later describe this neoliberal regime, as it perfectly fits the concept of discourse market, insofar as it organizes the horizontal equivalence of opinion and expertise. However, even if neoliberalism is rooted in the sensations and desires of consumers, it still works thanks to a structured architecture.

Recent events in the evolution of neoliberalism are also linked to the financialization of the world economy and its speculative nature, as well as to the fragmentation of the means of production and assembly around the globe. According to

Cingolani (2019), this logic is increasingly based on a convergence of capitalism, new technologies of information (and control) and the diversity impacting workers' status and wage. Despite its apparent disorganization, neoliberalism even reinforces power relationships at both personal and even intimate level (Cingolani 2019: 178).

Neoliberalism can thus be defined as the dominating extension of a specific form of capitalism that is exclusively rooted in the financialization of markets. In this sense, neoliberalism is intangible and operates through digital technologies, targets sensitive and emotional responses and guarantees uninterrupted consumption, which represents the fuel needed for its existence. Resources are needed in order for this process to function. They may be natural, human or even linguistic (Duchêne 2011) and represent grounds that are to be exploited and transformed into consumer goods. Hence power logics have to be implemented in order to maintain the exploitation and consumption of said resources (Dardot 2013), by making individuals responsible for their own choices within this system (Hache 2007).

As such, the neoliberal definition of markets can be applied to nation-states and individuals alike, inasmuch as it operates through a logic of social extension (Legrand 2007): competition emerges, even between entities that do not directly produce consumer goods. Furthermore, competition turns into a relational and interactional norm and imposes market logic as an obvious structure for social rapports (Dardot and Laval 2010: 37).

Neoliberalism thus becomes materialized through discourses that support the construction and circulation of neoliberal representations; however, discourses themselves actually obey the same neoliberal logic. In other words, discourses are not only to be analysed as mere echoes of neoliberalism, but really as emerging structures that carry within them the very processes of neoliberalism.

It is safe to assess that the neoliberal market logic has found a new incarnation in the general equivalence of discourses that overwhelms social networks and rolling news channels alike, where experts are invited in order to comment bits and pieces of information in a sheer horizontal manner. In this perspective, every speaker-listener-consumer has to choose between various offers of discourses, operating within discursive spaces that have been transformed into markets: everybody can select what they want, according to their opinions, preconstructions or centres of interest. Discourses thus do not enter into dialogue in order to maintain democracy (Ravat et al. 2020) but are all juxtaposed and considered equally legitimate and valid, just like products put on shelves. The neoliberal organization of discursive markets is rendered possible through the existence of a neoliberal metadiscourse that seems to colonize both discourses themselves as well as their distribution in the social space; this phenomenon can be described as the neoliberal and democratic doxa. The neoliberal logic of discursive markets functions like a background noise that draws on unspoken notions and principles: it invites citizens to act as consumers. In the end, contemporary democracies are fundamentally contaminated by what is to be described as an ideological project:

Neoliberalism itself causes the erosion of political, moral or subjective oppositions that are expressed within liberal democracies, but that are not rooted in capitalist rationality. This is also to be seen in the erosion of institutions, jurisdictions and values that allows the

existence of non-profit rationalities within democracies. The democratic principles of governance, civil code or even religious morality are submitted to economic calculations and there is neither value nor goods that can escape them; hotbeds of opposition to capitalist rationality and even hotbeds of reform then tend to disappear. (Brown 2004: 90)¹

Drawing on Brown's works, I argue that discourses follow the same total logic and are targeted by the neoliberal extension that has been thoroughly colonizing the diversity of social fields, thus colonizing our vision of both truth and reality.

As a matter of fact, it is important to take the time to understand the market as a notion and the central role it plays within the neoliberal system. My goal is not to produce a specific critique or market economy, but to understand how the market, as a concept and as an ideological instrument, becomes problematic when established as the fundamental compass of social life – and, of course, of discursive life. The groundbreaking works led by Halter (2000), for instance, have shown how market logic had been implemented in the questions linked to identity and culture altogether. Consequently, if identity is considered as a good that can be selected and enacted through acts of consumption or incarnation, the neoliberal logic colonizes matters of identity and fractures them in a postmodern way, by using the notion of bricolage to allow each individual-consumer to construct their own identity, or to change it depending on their desires and needs. This is a very clear example of what Legrand calls the social extension of the market:

The social extension of the market I am talking about are expressed through two specific aspects. First, the market is defined as a space of truth, which allows governance to apply a principle of verification-falsification. Second, a principle emerges: governance may only operate for the market and through the market, and the exercise of power as well as political legitimacy become both rooted in the very structure of market economy. (Legrand 2007: 44)²

According to Legrand's observations and to Halter's studies, it is safe to assess that the extension of the market in fact concerns the sphere of discourses. In fact, discourses are submitted to a principle of competition, especially through the heavy circulation of opinions and the neoliberal horizontality applied by the very notion of market itself. In that respect, every citizen-consumer owns the right to select discourses that most appeal to them, not because of their plausibility or their capacity to be discussed within the democratic sphere, but because said discourses appeal to them and match a pre-established worldview.

Consequently, the impact of the social extension of the market on a democratic and economic society is tremendous: the social and political life as a whole becomes slowly contaminated by the marketplace analogy and by the consumption paradigm (Gunn 2000: 451). In other words: the marketplace paradigm becomes 'the' reality – or 'the' truth we are forced to live in. Obviously, it is easy to apply this logic to discourses and truth in general: as goods disposable on the marketplace, discourses are directly linked to individual choices and waves of trends operating within the market. The social extension of neoliberalism and the market analogy do

¹ Author's translation from French.

² Author's translation from French.

not only reach education, culture or health: both do initiate transformations that impact the circulation of representations carried by discourses.

Defining neoliberalism, markets and their subsequent notions and processes is necessary: however, it is also essential to propose a definition of discourses. Such a definition is needed to work with the notion of discourse and its subtleties, particularly in order to understand how the process of neoliberal colonization functions in this case:

A discourse is any phenomenon linked to language (linguistically speaking, but not exclusively) that concerns the construction, interaction and transformation of a socially situated and structuring meaning. Thus, discourse may be politically signifying and is obviously rooted in essential intersubjectivity, may it be intentional or not; this intersubjectivity is produced and received by subjects that can express themselves in an individual or collective manner, about shareable objects. In that respect, discourse is not exclusively linguistic, communicational or social: it remains at the core and in the margins of each one of these dimensions, while gathering them at the same time. (Wagener 2019: 39)³

This definition tends to embrace the sheer situated and multidimensional nature of discourse: I use it to understand how the gentrification of discursive spaces might occur and how zombemes might emerge as new features of language.

Discursive Spaces as Resources

The neoliberal metadiscourse both produces and organizes the discursive market; it also structures the conditions of the circulation of discourses. This metadiscourse cannot be immediately grasped yet remains fully present, insofar as it structures relations between associated discourses. In a sense, it operates as a discursive dark matter that is not directly accessible and draws on the concept of semantic dark matter:

(...) semantic dark matter circulates with discursive utterances and does not only say something about the state of the world or a galaxy of representations. It is more than this: semantic dark matter perpetuates political organizations, shared and shareable social views as well as structured representations made available to individuals whose sole aim is to make sense of the world and, thus, make society. (Wagener 2019: 153)⁴

As such, the neoliberal colonization of discursive spaces would then be able to operate by drawing on spaces and energies granted to semantic dark matter, thus leaving an ideological footprint on discourses themselves. In this perspective, this colonization represents an operation of discursive manipulation, which uses existing resources in order to modify representations:

Manipulative discourse exploits the inherent weaknesses of the interpretative process to ensure that a sub-optimal interpretation is indeed arrived at, i.e. to ensure that one of the

³ Author's translation from French.

⁴ Author's translation from French.

predicted error occurs. In this context, this approach looks at manipulative uses as a built-in – and hence, inevitable – consequence of the way our pragmatic system operates. (...) A manipulator will achieve their goal by having a re-ordering action on the cognitive environment of the hearer so as to guarantee that a given utterance *U* will be interpreted within an appropriate subset of contextual assumptions, independently of the expected presence of contradictory assumptions in the cognitive environment of the hearer (...). Manipulation is therefore re-analysed as an instance of *Context Selection Constraint*. (Maillat 2013: 194) (emphasis from the original)

This dark matter actually pollutes the discursive market with discursive architectures: it influences each and every perception and representation that circulates within a certain framework. This framework represents a hegemonic system, inasmuch as it contaminates a high number of social and economic devices and apparatus. Furthermore, this process also draws on emotions defined as motivational states (Frijda 2003), which underlines their crucial role in the definition of neoliberalism, insofar as it fuels acts of consumption by affects and desires.

In this perspective, I argue that it is important to rely the process of context selection constraint defined by Maillat to the definition of ideology proposed by Sarfati, seen as companion to the concept of doxa:

Ideologization can be described as an operation of semantic transplant from a reduced and biased point of view. (...) In order to defend their interests, institutions of meaning put ideological constructions into circulations; such constructions may offer a positive image of their activity and, consequently, a negative image of opposing institutions. (Sarfati 2011: 158–159)⁵

According to Sarfati, ideology and doxa represent two faces of the same coin. However, Stockinger does not follow the same path and proposes a definition of common meaning that is rooted in ideologization processes: ‘It is ideology, in the epistemic sense, that implements the doxa (or common meaning), as well as its rooting in an obviousness that is mediatized through experiences and traditions shared by members of a group or a social organization’ (Stockinger 2001: 81).⁶ Ideologization processes are thus able to contaminate the common meaning that circulates within and through discursive representations. Such processes work according to manipulation processes rooted in a semantic dark matter that remains inconspicuous at first, yet shows how discourse is simultaneously to be found in both the spoken and the unspoken. Moreover, operations of ideological colonization are rendered possible through the notion of interdiscourse (Pêcheux 1975), which shows how discourses are ontologically linked together through dynamic relations (Garric and Longhi 2013: 65).

According to this logic, the neoliberal ideology infuses, thanks to a process of context selection constraint. Hence it transforms circulating bits of common meaning in a dynamic way, by drawing on semantic dark matter as a resource, as well as on the possibility to disseminate chunks of ideology through interconnected inter-discursive universes.

⁵ Author’s translation from French.

⁶ Author’s translation from French.

The contaminating evolution of neoliberalism shows that ideology is not simply a semantic transplant coming from a specific doxa, as Sarfati assesses. On the contrary, the architecture of discursive spaces, combined with the notions of interdiscourse and semantic dark matter, underlines the fact that ideology needs to be defined as a macrostructure of intricate networks. In fact, this macro-structure can even be found in specialized or scientific discourses; no linguistic register is safe from ideology, especially if the latter has even the project to absorb its critical counterparts, which is the case for neoliberalism.

For instance, the simple desire to buy a new car, to comment love relationships or travel destinations is a never meaningless utterance. As discourses drawing on shared social experiences and desires that circulate in the social sphere, they may indeed carry the seed of neoliberalism; such as volatile pollen, it can hang on a high variety of discursive genres and structures. This is especially relevant because every discursive action carries shareable meaning (Howarth 2000) that is constitutive of social reality (Ramonedá 2011) and submitted to power struggles (Torfing 2005); all these parameters write the story of discursive possibilities.

Beyond the very question of discourse, it is important to state that discourses are to be seen as resources to exploit; this is notably due to the fact that social and linguistic operations become increasingly quantified and transformed into data – the contemporary black gold of our digitized societies. This conception of information is rooted in the notion of cognitive capitalism (Rullani 2000) that has been extended and augmented by neoliberal ideology; this has made the notion of resource even more relevant, insofar as it is linked to the colonial origins of modern capitalism and thus to its contemporary neoliberal form: ‘At the heart of the problem of colonialism are transformations in social and economic organization intimately tied to the extraction of natural resources from peripheral communities’ (Holst 2015: 203). In that respect, the exploitation of resources does impact social and economic organizations; neoliberalism has managed to extend this very analogy beyond sheer natural resources, even to non-profit activities. It is easy to see how seemingly harmless individual information can turn into resources to be exploited (Coudry and Mejias 2019), especially through the increasing domination of information and communication technologies. To cut a long story short, it would be difficult to argue that this trend cannot be applied to discourses.

The neoliberal colonization of discourses has, for instance, already been explored through the study of discourses of authority used in the French laws on pension reforms (Devriendt and Monte 2015) or through the analysis of corporate language and the transformations it implies in terms of work organization (D’Almeida and Avisseau 2010: 128). The neoliberal ideology colonizes and spoils (or leaves to rot) specific words or discursive formations, such as ‘engagement’, ‘make someone adhere to certain values’ or even the use and abuse of the word ‘skill’. Hence linguistic terms and formations that seem to be relatively safe from commercial capitalism get absorbed by a progressive logic of ideological colonization. Again, I wish to underline the importance of language itself that is acted upon as a resource to exploit in the neoliberal logic: contamination works as the main operating principle,

within interdiscourses, in order to affect prediscourses and to influence the production of postdiscourses (Wagener 2016).

In order to gain a better understanding of what is at stake, I propose the following examples that are all accessible on LinkedIn, which is probably the main professional social network as I am writing this chapter; they all concern the word ‘meaningful’ as used in the professional and corporate context:

1. ‘If you want to gain exposure to corporate life, get introduced to executive search and recruitment, and you enjoy working across multiple and *meaningful* projects, this **#internship** is for you.’ (27 August 2020) (emphasis from the original)⁷
2. ‘Many of my peers are motivated by money. I grew up poor, so I know that money isn’t everything. Some of the others want to be famous. I would rather have *meaningful* connections. And yet others still desire more power and influence. I would rather be more kind. You see, money comes and goes, fame does not make you a better person, and your title does not determine who you are. You do.’ (28 August 2020) (emphasis from the original)⁸
3. ‘I’m truly blessed to join the professionals at BCI. We have an amazing team dedicated to enriching the lives of adults with disabilities and their families through *meaningful* employment.’ (27 August 2020) (emphasis from the original)⁹
4. ‘I’m pleased to inform everyone that I have started my first job as a Software Development Engineer at **Jio**. I’m very thankful to (...) everyone who worked hard to ensure a smooth onboarding experience. Again, I’m thankful to **Jio** for providing me with the opportunity to do interesting and *meaningful* work that will contribute toward building a better world.’ (26 August 2020) (emphasis from the original)¹⁰
5. ‘As an **Amazon Web Services (AWS)** Software Development Manager, you’ll help team members learn and grow in their careers, while inspiring them to deliver *meaningful* results for our customers. Come build your best tomorrow with us **#HereAtAWS**.’ (28 August 2020) (emphasis from the original)¹¹
6. ‘People Success = Customer Success = Company Success. In that order. Invest in your team, genuinely care about them as people, take *meaningful* action to further their professional development, listen to them, support them and they will invest in you, your customers and your company. Align your customer’s goals to your company goals – your company only exists because of your

⁷ See https://www.linkedin.com/posts/zhawwari_intern-majidalfuttaim-internship-activity-6703657931734339584-TRVg. Accessed 20 December 2020.

⁸ See https://www.linkedin.com/posts/garyltravis_garytravis-leadership-bestadvice-activity-6704069851234877440%2D%2D8ll. Accessed 20 December 2020.

⁹ See https://www.linkedin.com/posts/troy-compardo-582ba78_boone-center-inc-names-new-ceo-activity-6704117009061339136-xxrk. Accessed 20 December 2020.

¹⁰ See https://www.linkedin.com/posts/thesagarsehgal_techster2020-learningatjio-lifeatjio-activity-6703897316149002240-lhzd. Accessed 20 December 2020.

¹¹ See https://www.linkedin.com/posts/amazon_hereataws-with-helbert-maich-activity-6704077239597846528-xRqp. Accessed 20 December 2020.

customers so your focus should be making them successful. If you get that right and you have a compelling product/service the market needs, the revenue and company success will follow.’ (29 August 2020) (emphasis from the original)¹²

7. ‘Of the many things I am proud of this appointment to the Google Dealer Council was one of the most *meaningful*. I am thankful for the opportunity to serve, to learn, and to contribute. *#thinkwithgoogle*.’ (29 August 2020) (emphasis from the original)¹³

I could go on, but the main point present in such examples is that meaning can be used by LinkedIn users and businesses to work, connections, results, action and even projects – to name but a few possible lexical colocations. For users, ‘meaningful’ genuinely seems to carry a positive value: it is used in the context of a new job, of successful business development, of specific career shifts and professional relationships. These direct lexical colocations testify for a positive linguistic accumulation, which structures a positive discourse on meaning and meaningful events in professional lives, yet hardly conceals a discursive double entendre:

- There seems to be a possible gap between meaningful actions and work life, which conceals various neoliberal ideologemes (or markers of ideology), in word clusters such as ‘while inspiring them to deliver meaningful results for our customers’, ‘you enjoy working across multiple and meaningful projects, this internship is for you’ or ‘take meaningful action to further their professional development’. I argue that such discursive formations show a polarized distinction between the individual, who is responsible for changes in their life, and the others, who remain depicted as resources to be satisfied in a professional framework, which shows an obvious lack of selfless sense for otherness.
- The quest for meaning appears to be linked to a form of corporate luxury that can only be accessible to certain professionals, while a lot of jobs may have trouble to get genuinely connected to the notion of meaning or self-realization.

It would be equally interesting to focus on other specific words or formulas to find examples and study them; what I mean to argue is that neutral or positive words become desubstantialized by a positive overrating within professional and corporate contexts. This is rendered possible by the organization of discursive spaces where abusively positive repetitions of words and expressions occur while being progressively desubstantialized through this very process.

Such an operation of desubstantialization does not indicate that words lose all meaning, in the semantic sense of the term; such a loss would imply that meaning is solely carried by the world, whereas it clearly operates in a dynamic and interactional manner with its social environment. On the contrary, in the case of desubstantialization, a socially shareable avatar of meaning is put into circulation and

¹² See https://www.linkedin.com/posts/meganwhitebowen_peoplefirst-customersuccess-leadership-activity-6703972493872431104-7JyQ. Accessed 20 December 2020.

¹³ See https://www.linkedin.com/posts/bbenstock_thinkwithgoogle-activity-6703689997163278336-yo-J. Accessed 20 December 2020.

seemingly functions with the qualities of the word itself – especially the most positive ones, which clearly shows evidence for desubstantialization. Going back to our examples, I posit that the word ‘meaningful’ becomes semantically linked to its lexical contexts in a consensual and seemingly harmless manner. In this perspective, ‘meaningful’ shows signs of neoliberal contamination and becomes what I call a zombeme, activated within a gentrified discursive space. I will get back to these notions later in the present chapter.

The desubstantialization process shows how neoliberal ideology colonizes discourses, particularly because of its ability to generate what Dormeau calls ontopolitics (Dormeau 2019). In this perspective, citizen-consumers make conscious choices while submitting themselves to an ideology they think they are able to benefit from; this process works in the spirit of social and economic conformity and implies the deliberate submission of citizens to a framework that this perceived as tailor-made (Dormeau 2019: 142). Dormeau assesses that the construction of such a seemingly tailor-made framework is precisely what drives neoliberal colonization, and I argue that this is also the case for discursive spaces. I will now take the time to understand how discourses can get submitted to such an operation of contamination.

Colonization, Gentrification and Zombemes

To better understand the processes on which relies the neoliberal colonization of discourses, it is of course necessary to define colonization. Of course, I am not using the term in a sheer historical way and clearly do not wish to draw any awkward or offensive parallel with the political predation that affected so many countries throughout the world. I will rather take the time to understand how colonization operates as anthropological mechanics, in order to extend it to the dimensions of language and discourse. My definition of colonization is directly connected to the definition of neoliberalism: it underlines a change of paradigm from historical capitalist colonization to neoliberal colonization (Clarno 2017). This version of colonization draws upon the concept of biopolitics and fosters the creation of active processes of decolonization (Mignolo 2013). In that respect, colonization (and, of course, colonialism) is rooted in the notion of looting (Ravelli 2019: 43).

Hence the following hypothesis: the origins of modern capitalism are to be found in multiple phenomena, yet they are all directly linked to the process of colonization and its following applications:

- Confiscation of spaces.
- Looting of resources present on such spaces (material treasures and human beings alike, to name but a few targets).
- Imposed reorganization of systems that exist on said spaces towards a process of resource exploitation (material and human).
- Enrichment of settlers/colons because of this very reorganization.

I thus argue that colonization functions through a quadrangular scheme based on four clear concepts that are in constant interaction: confiscation, looting, exploitation and enrichment. The compass that emerges from these four concepts represents colonization as a social, political and economic phenomenon.

Colonization may also be applied to the context of discourse. In fact, by doing so, the same quadrangular scheme quickly emerges from a semantic perspective, thus treating discourse as a sheer resource:

- Confiscation of discursive and linguistic spaces, most of all through the visible inflation of neoliberal discourses and devices.
- Looting of semantic resources present on such spaces.
- Imposed reorganization of systems that exist on said spaces, towards a process of exploitation of lexical, semantic and discursive resources, though an intricate play with semantic ambiguities and positive values (as can be witnessed with the term 'meaningful', for instance).
- Enrichment of neoliberalism because of this very process of exploitation that progressively gains ground, slowly contaminating intimate and individual territories, as well as political spheres.

Such an operation is not instantly noticeable, since it is disguised as an acceptable and normal social process. There lies the strength of neoliberal ideology and its colonization of discourses of 'common meaning' (Sarfati 2011): it does not seem dangerous at all and coils up in a semantic consensus that appears to be entirely harmless at first.

Gentrification, I assess, is a much-needed concept if one wishes to get a better understanding of neoliberal colonization; in fact, gentrification represents an acceptable mask of the neoliberal colonization of discourses. Obviously, scholars have been studying the phenomenon of gentrification for decades, particularly in the field of social geography. For many authors, gentrification is to be defined as a form of neoliberalization of urban spaces:

The generalization of gentrification has various dimensions. These can be understood in terms of five interrelated characteristics: the transformed role of the state, penetration by global finance, changing levels of political opposition, geographical dispersal, and the sectoral generalization of gentrification. (Smith 2002: 441)

In fact, one of the main effects of gentrification is to drive working classes out of the urban spaces of city centres and then of other parts of the city, in order to relegate them to the peripheries of the cities (Van Criekingen and Fleury 2006). However, public and private elites will quickly rebrand gentrification as 'urban regeneration' (Smith 2002: 443), a strategic semantic choice that is notably found in urban planning documents and policies. Indeed, unlike gentrification, the positive symbol of 'urban regeneration' does not so much put the focus on class euration, but rather on the renewed attractivity of certain urban spaces that become less unpleasant to live in; moreover, it is more profitable in terms of real estate investment (Redfern 2003).

Furthermore, the gentrification of urban spaces has a lot in common with colonization itself: such a parallel is indeed relevant, when it comes to the role of gentrification as a mask of colonization. In fact, gentrification draws on class privilege, deregulation and a style of city management that is directly inspired by business life (Atkinson and Bridge 2005: 2). It is important to consider the links between gentrification, colonization and neoliberalism when studying the context of discursive spaces; it is even more important to state that discursive spaces do not exist independently from their speakers, but rather that they do participate in the transmission, the animation and the colonization of neoliberal ideology by using and validating sentences and words that rely on said ideology. In other words, gentrification excludes individuals who could not or would not wish to take part in the neoliberal process in one way or another (Clark 2005) and adapts to the specificities of spaces (Hackworth and Smith 2001). The same applies for speakers: they become slowly won over by neoliberal colonization, depending on their social, professional or economic status.

My theory is as follows: the gentrification of discursive spaces indeed draws on the notion of ‘discursive regeneration’ and may leave the impression that problematic, oppositional, critical or negative discourses become transformed in both positive and motivating utterances. Discourses targeted by the consensual yet colonizing mask of neoliberal gentrification thus become slowly desubstantialized (or degenerated) and re-substantialized. Consequently, such discourses operate, thanks to a new ideological paradigm that becomes semantically inherent. The result of such a contaminating processes leads to the emergence of what I call zombemes.

The use of analogy is intentional here, insofar as it allows the development of features that would be difficult to reach without metaphor: it enhances the creation and transmission of concept and notion in both science and education (Aubusson et al. 2006). Moreover, it does work as a method, particularly when incorporated into a theoretical framework that does use other scientific developments and leaves place for metaphors in order to better understand certain aspects of the world (Cameron 2013).

By applying this metaphor, I posit that zombemes are different from stereotyped language or even reified phrases:

- Stereotyped language actually distances social, economic or political facts in order to avoid naming them, thus multiplying linguistic utterances (Lopez Diaz 2014) that are entirely or partially technicized or stereotyped (Oustinoff 2010): such language in reality builds up semantic aberrations that distance themselves from reality (Dewitte 2010).
- Reified phrases, or ‘formulas’ in linguistics, work through specific lexical processes such as conventionality, undetermined sloganeering, semantic freezing or automatic collocation (Krieg-Planque 2009).

Zombemes may obviously be found in stereotyped language or reified phrases: they can adapt themselves to a high variety of enunciative contexts (‘meaningful’, for instance, as a zombeme, may also constitute a kind of stereotyped language in the work sphere). Nevertheless, zombemes cannot be strictly limited to reified phrases or stereotyped language.

In other words, stereotyped language encompasses rhetorical methods that buries argumentation in the sand and avoids relevant naming, while reified phrases or formulas rely on the hypercirculation of linguistic devices that progressively freeze and slowly drift away from their semantic origin. Zombemes, on the other hand, are caused by the neoliberal ideological colonization of discursive spaces and contexts of enunciation. In that respect, zombemes do not refer to zombies for fun only; they own all their ambiguous qualities, namely, inaction, waiting and erring ways, as well as predatory and voracious action (Coulombe 2012) – qualities that are also inherent to neoliberalism (Peck 2010). Furthermore, zombemes contain the seeds of transmission and virality, hence the contamination to other words, sentences or contexts of enunciation; this process can, for instance, be perceived in the extension of the concept of skill, as a managerial operator, to the world of education and teaching (Crahay 2006). The metaphor of the zombie also somehow reminds of the logic of hectic and senseless predation of neoliberal capitalism (Webb and Byrnannd 2008), as well as of its undead yet ever circulating economic doctrine (Quiggin 2012). I propose Table 10.1 in order to explore the qualities of stereotyped language, reified language (or formulas) and zombemes.

Zombemes may be recognized based on the following characteristics and can thus be isolated from a discursive point of view:

- Zombemes may be found in simple words, whole sentences or reified formulas.
- Zombemes prosper within discursive spaces and contexts of enunciation that have been or are currently being gentrified – meaning confiscated, looted, reorganized and depleted by neoliberal ideology and its representations.
- They rely on desubstantialized qualities that are not operating by relying on their initial semantic meaning, but by drawing on the contamination initiated by neoliberal ideology.
- They also rely on neoliberal semantic dark matter, inasmuch as they become ideologized through smoothed and positive semantic expressions that are rooted in the fundamental principles of neoliberal ideology – namely, individual responsibility, exploitation of resources, inclusion of oppositions, market logic

Table 10.1 Differences between stereotyped language, reified language and zombemes

	Stereotyped language	Reified language	Zombemes
Semantic goal	Semantic avoidance	Semantic freezing and hypercirculation	Semantic desubstantialization
Linguistic form	Multiplication of utterances	Automatic colocations	Smoothed expressions
Semantic process	Technicizing	Sloganeering	Neoliberalizing
Relation to reality	Distant	Conventional	Ideological
Degree of virality	Low	High	High
Relation to the context of enunciation	Context-avoidant	Context-dependent	Context-contaminating

and merely economic structuration of social fields that have no purely financial vocation, among others.

- Finally, they also operate on behalf of larger discursive architectures that actually conceal neoliberal representations to be seen in discourse and interdiscourse.

In this manner, zombemes cannot be identified through their sheer linguistic qualities, but by analysing their actual discursive universe; thus cues of neoliberalism are not to be found within zombemes themselves, but in their context of enunciation and their representational galaxies.

Zombemes are part of a general neoliberal design of deceit and dupery: they seem clear enough to be used and reused in various contexts, yet hold the germs of an ideology that wishes to stay away from the light. Zombemes are closely tied to the sheer particularity of neoliberalism: an ideology that presents itself as something that is not an ideology, but a view of the world based on facts and realism. Zombemes, however, only have the lexical appearance of factual observations: they do bias the way we look at the world by telling us how it should be – not how it is. Yet beneath this seemingly harmless lexical appearance lies a semantic process that misleads speakers into believing that words can be unpolitical and that reality is something that could never be colonized by an ideology. In this perspective, neoliberalism uses zombemes to turn into a form of quantum ideology: it appears to be absent, until you measure it.

Conclusion: Decontaminating Discourses in a Postdigital Society

The goal of this chapter was both simple and complex: (a) apply the principles of the colonization of neoliberal ideology to the field of discourse; (b) show how discursive spaces function by relying on market logic, because of the very neoliberal system that structures economic, political and social spheres alike; and (c), finally, establish a theory of a linguistic incarnation of said neoliberal ideology through the notion of gentrification of discursive spaces, as well as the progressive yet structuring emergence of zombemes.

My work is only preliminary and theoretical, yet it holds a truly applicable dimension. Indeed, it will now be important to produce discursive studies that will show how certain zombemes are actively circulating; this will be rendered even more possible, thanks to the postdigital organization of society (Andersen et al. 2014). This postdigital organization implies the blurring of traditional frontiers between both online and offline discursive spaces and a discursive influence that increasingly and persistently affects the social space (Jandrić et al. 2018). This influence is based on the definition of attention as a limited resource (Weng et al. 2012) and the explosion of short narrative arcs (Rose 2012); these narrative arcs become also subject to the inflation of fake news and reinvented truth that can be

described as resources that push discourses away from the simple relation to truth or reality (Wagener 2020).

The layout of the postdigital shift of discursive spaces consequently causes the proliferation of zombemes. This is rendered possible because of the liquefaction of representations colonized by neoliberal ideology, as well as corollary discursive gentrification. In this perspective, I argue that discourse analysis plays a central and particular part for years to come: it has to conceive and structure tools that will help flush out zombemes or any other discursive form that may rely on unclear predicates. This way, discourse analysis may finally be able to offer devices that will be essential to the education to the versatility, variability and fragility of discourses – and to the fact that they represent extensions of our humanity, strengths and vulnerabilities included.

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