SDM: What is the goal and purpose of the statement?

JR: The statement is an effort, in the first place, is to kind of talk about this issue and to bring insights from our discipline from linguistic anthropology to bear on debate about language use and immigration and the idea is that we don't simply want to say that the problem here is language, right? The problem here is finding a better word as though as if we were to replace the notion of illegal immigration with another word that suddenly the problems around immigration would be solved. In one sense it's not simply an issue of language. On the other hand, language really is essential to the discussion because of the ways it leads people to believe certain things about who immigrants are, what immigration is. You're calling into question the way the illegality has been used is the primary purpose of the statement.

SDM: What are some of the historical implications of using terms that delegitimize groups of people in the US?

JR: Part of the problem with the kind of contemporary public discussion about immigration is that it's often framed as a matter, a straightforward matter of right and wrong or of individual choices of migrants themselves. If people merely decided to be legal or illegal, this really erases a history of shifting immigration laws in the United States and shifting access to citizenship in the US where certain groups have had straightforward accolades to citizenship or for certain groups citizenship is a birthright and for other groups there's complete exclusion from citizenship and so it's important to locate this moment in relation to these previous histories.

For example, the current discussions about immigration usually focus on Latinos, but throughout US history other groups have been the focus so that the first kind of national immigration law was an 1882 act called the Chinese Exclusion Act, which pertained to persons of Chinese descent who were completely barred from immigrating to the United States. And this has to do with a specific post Civil War economic moment where after Chinese folks had built the transcontinental railroad for the United States, their services and their presence is no longer desired and so the effort to rid the nation of their presence.

There are some other kinds of interesting historical discussion to have. First is that the Chinese exclusion was just the beginning of immigration law. That was actually expanded to all of Asian Pacific America as of 1917. The Asiatic Barred Zone Act that all Asians were barred from immigration to the United States. Interesting to note that in the same year in 1917 that all Asians are barred from immigrating to the United States, all Puerto Ricans - and Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States in 1917. All Puerto Ricans are made citizens of the United States by the Jones Act.

In some cases, citizenship is a birthright, and in some cases people are naturalized as citizens, and in some cases citizenship is imposed upon people non-consentually. When we frame the discussion in these terms, we can see that it involves many groups of people, not just Latinos, not just Pacific subgroups among Latinos, Mexicans, Central Americans, South Americans. We can see that actually there are actually a lot of different kinds of people who get wrapped up in this.

SDM: In fact, undocumented immigration is actually a civil offense other than a criminal one; tell us how the word “illegal” is accurate?

JR: The Associated Press Style Book and the Deputy Standards Editor suggested that “illegal immigrant” is the preferred term because it's “accurate and neutral.” This is a really frustrating notion. To be clear, the US Immigration and Nationality Act defines the word “immigrant” as people who have been lawfully admitted for permanent residence. So in other words, if you are an immigrant, then you are lawful and have been admitted for permanent residence. That means there's no such thing as an illegal immigrant in law. So that’s a political concept that certain groups have promoted, but from the perspective of the law, there's no such thing as “illegal immigration”.

Part of the other problem with the ways that notions such as “illegality” and “illegal immigrant” confuse this situation is the way that when we think about something as being illegal we think of it as a criminal offense. However, immigration is a civil matter which means that it's not illegal to be in the United States if you are unauthorized, even though many people think that if you are here without authorization that that is criminal and I think that if we look at the way that this terminology is used, we can see how troublesome it is or how problematic it is. If someone commits any other kind of offense or transgression, we might say that if someone is parked somewhere and they're violating some sort of parking ordinance, we might saw that they are in fact illegally parked somewhere, but we would never call that person illegal. However, based on violations of immigration regulations, literally people are framed as being illegal and people refer to people as illegal and so this is part of the problem.

SDM: After you communicated this to *The New York Times*, how did they react, especially when you said that the term “illegal” was neither accurate nor neutral?

JR: *The New York Times* public editor is blogging about this recently and they simply are unwilling to engage with some of the information that we've been providing them, but in order to enter into this conversation as a journalist, we need to enter dialogue with their perspective, but to suggest the term “illegal “ is neutral is really frustrating because it demonstrates

kind of an unwillingness to really engage in a dialogue about the way that these terms have been used. The way terms such as “illegal” and alternatives such as “undocumented” are used are really as flags of one’s political affiliation or political persuasions so that either of these phrases is really about accuracy or neutrality at all - which is why we've suggested terms that aren’t as ideologically or politically loaded. Some have suggested the use of terms like “an unauthorized migrant,” but again we don’t think that simply an alternative term is going to fix the problem, it's just that if *The New York Times* is claiming that it's using accurate and neutral language, then we really want to hold them to that statement. We have to remember, of course, that you see bumper stickers and all kinds of things that say, “Illegal immigrant hunting permit.” People are really framed as targets.

Oftentimes once a group is defined in a certain way, they can be subjected to profound forms of stigmatization and so we're really trying to look at this situation in historical perspective looking backwards, but also looking forwards. This contemporary discussion will be a moment that is viewed in the future as a moment of national shame.

The idea is that this debate about language can, in fact, be an opportunity to open up a broader discussion about immigration in general and how we understand immigration and the is idea is if we call ourselves a nation of immigrants, we have to have a much more humane approach to this situation. As it stands right now, material objects and commodities have more rights to cross borders than human beings.

SDM: Jonathan Rosa, thank you so much for speaking with me on KBOO.

JR: Thank you.

SDM: This is Sarika Mehta with KBOO News.