

THE GRAMMAR OF ERASURE: FROM NAZI CLASSIFICATION TO ZIONIST CONTAINMENT

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ABSTRACT

The precise moment when language transitions from description to destruction remains elusive, particularly within genocide discourse where institutional frameworks systematically obscure Palestinian suffering. This paper examines the metamorphosis of bureaucratic classification into what we term a ‘grammar of erasure’—a structural process wherein administrative language operationalizes dehumanization as policy. This creates a communicative ‘double bind’ that superficially acknowledges contestability while ultimately re-imposing discursive closure. Our contribution demonstrates how institutional discourse progresses from recognizing the complexity of genocide to reinstating categorical certainty, thereby facilitating the rationalized erasure of Palestinian existence. This paper argues that the bureaucratic apparatus—through its grammatical structures, syntactical arrangements, and classificatory systems—enacts ontological violence by transmuting lived experience into administrable categories. Furthermore, we contend that philosophy must reckon with its complicity in generating such taxonomies to cultivate linguistic practices capable of resisting systemic erasure.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to define genocide, not merely as a matter of legal precision or historical interpretation, but as a fundamental problem of language and power. The Palestinian case exemplifies this definitional instability, where claims of genocide are simultaneously asserted and denied within competing discursive frameworks. This tension reflects a deeper structural paradox: the very mechanisms designed to identify and prevent mass violence often become sites where certain forms of suffering are rendered invisible through procedural and linguistic means. The ongoing situation in Palestine thus serves as a critical case study for examining how genocide discourse functions within contemporary political and academic spheres.

The academic and legal discourse surrounding genocide has long been characterized by a fundamental split between those who advocate for expansive, context-sensitive understandings of the term and those who insist upon rigid, narrowly-defined criteria Meiches (2017). This division creates a double bind where the Palestinian experience is caught between competing interpretive frameworks. While expansive definitions risk diluting the term’s analytical precision, restrictive definitions may exclude cases that manifest through novel mechanisms of destruction Moses (2021). This tension is not merely academic—it has profound implications for how suffering is recognized, documented, and addressed within international legal and political institutions.

Within this contested terrain, Palestine occupies a peculiar position of simultaneous visibility and deniability. The systematic nature of displacement, fragmentation, and control exercised over Palestinian populations generates claims that resonate with established understandings of genocide, particularly Raphael Lemkin’s original conception which emphasized the destruction of a group’s pattern of life Lemkin (1944). Yet these same claims are often dismissed through what might be termed ‘procedural absolution’—the deployment of bureaucratic and legal technicalities that acknowledge contestability while ultimately re-imposing discursive closure. This process renders Palestinian suffering perpetually debatable rather than actionable, visible enough to be discussed but never sufficiently legitimate to warrant decisive intervention.

This paper’s purpose extends beyond asking what genocide means to examining how speaking about genocide functions within a socio-linguistic field that systematically normalizes Palestinian erasure.

Drawing on philosophical frameworks from Foucault (1970), Arendt (1963), and Agamben (1998), we analyze the grammatical and syntactical structures of bureaucratic classification that transform lived experience into administrable categories. Our focus is not on establishing equivalences between historical cases, but rather on tracing the shared logics by which administrative reason operates to produce what we term a ‘grammar of erasure’—a systematic process where language ceases to describe and begins to destroy through its very structure and operation.

The analysis proceeds in three parts. First, we examine the definitional contestation surrounding genocide and the specific mechanisms through which Palestinian suffering is marginalized within academic and legal discourse. Second, we develop the conceptual framework of the ‘grammar of erasure’, analyzing how bureaucratic systems create double binds that acknowledge complexity while reinstating categorical certainty. Finally, we conclude by considering how philosophy might confront its complicity in producing categories that enable systemic erasure, and explore possibilities for developing linguistic practices capable of resisting such violence. Through this structure, we aim to illuminate not only the conditions under which genocide discourse operates, but also the potential for its transformation toward more ethical engagement with suffering.

2 RELATED WORK

Building on James C. Scott’s analysis of how states employ classification systems to render societies legible and administrable, our work examines how such bureaucratic mechanisms transform into instruments of erasure in genocide discourse. This foundation allows us to situate our concept of ‘grammar of erasure’ within broader scholarly discussions of state power and administrative violence.

The relationship between bureaucratic classification and systemic violence has been explored through various theoretical lenses. Foucault (1970) established how knowledge systems produce and regulate subjects through classification, while Arendt (1963) revealed how bureaucratic processes can normalize extraordinary violence through routinization. Agamben (1998) further developed this analysis by examining how sovereign power operates through the production of ‘bare life’—human existence stripped of political recognition.

In genocide studies, Meiches (2017) has examined the discursive double binds that constrain how genocide is recognized and discussed, while Moses (2021) has analyzed the language of transgression and permanent security in genocide discourse. Our work builds upon these foundations by specifically examining how bureaucratic classification systems operate as linguistic technologies that enact what we term a ‘grammar of erasure.’

Bauman (1989) provides crucial insights into how modernity’s rationalizing impulses can facilitate mass violence, particularly through bureaucratic systems that obscure moral responsibility. Similarly, Derrida (1995) offers tools for deconstructing the archival practices that both preserve and erase certain forms of existence. These theoretical frameworks inform our analysis of how administrative language transforms lived experience into manageable categories.

The work of Lemkin (1944) remains foundational for understanding genocide as the destruction of a group’s ‘pattern of life’, while Butler (2004) contributes important insights into how certain lives become ‘ungrievable’ within dominant recognition frameworks. Our analysis bridges these perspectives by examining how bureaucratic classification systems systematically render certain patterns of life unrecognizable and therefore ungrievable.

Finally, Said (1978) and Mbembe (2003) provide crucial postcolonial and necropolitical perspectives that help situate our analysis of Palestinian erasure within broader histories of colonial violence and racial categorization. These works illuminate how classification systems have long served as instruments of colonial control and population management.

3 DISCUSSION

Our analysis demonstrates that language transitions from description to destruction precisely when bureaucratic classification systems transform lived identities into administrable categories, enacting what we term a ‘grammar of erasure.’ This addresses our core research question by revealing the mechanisms through which language becomes instrumental in systemic violence. The Palestinian case

exemplifies how this grammar operates through a double bind that acknowledges contestability while systematically reinstating discursive closure, thereby normalizing the erasure of Palestinian existence within institutional frameworks. This process extends beyond mere linguistics to fundamentally reshape ontological conditions of recognition and debatability.

The theoretical frameworks of Foucault (1970), Arendt (1963), and Agamben (1998) provide crucial insights for understanding these dynamics, while James C. Scott's work on state simplification schemes offers a crucial sociological perspective on classification practices. Foucault's analysis of classification systems as instruments of power illuminates how bureaucratic taxonomies actively produce the categories they purport to describe. Arendt's concept of the banality of evil manifests in contemporary administrative procedures that obscure systemic violence through routine operations. Agamben's notion of bare life materializes in the reduction of Palestinian existence to security categories subject to management and control. These connections affirm the continued relevance of these philosophical frameworks for analyzing modern bureaucratic violence.

The significance of our findings lies in demonstrating how genocide discourse functions not merely as definitional debate but as a site where recognition of suffering is systematically foreclosed. The grammar of erasure reveals how institutional language produces what Butler (2004) terms 'ungrievable lives'—those whose destruction remains unacknowledged within dominant recognition frameworks. This has profound implications for international law and human rights advocacy, suggesting that addressing mass violence requires attention not only to substantive definitions but to the discursive conditions that enable or prevent recognition.

Our findings both confirm and extend existing scholarship. While Meiches (2017) identified double binds in political genocide discourse, we demonstrate their specific operation through bureaucratic classification systems. Similarly, Moses (2021) examined transgressive language in genocide discourse, but our concept of grammar of erasure provides a more precise framework for understanding how linguistic structures themselves become instruments of violence. Our work builds upon Lemkin (1944) by showing how the destruction of a group's 'pattern of life' occurs not only through physical violence but through systematic dismantling of linguistic and administrative recognition.

An unexpected finding concerns what we term 'procedural acknowledgment'—where institutions superficially engage genocide claims while developing sophisticated dismissal mechanisms. This suggests the grammar of erasure evolves in response to challenges, developing new syntactical forms that maintain closure while appearing to accommodate contestation. This adaptive quality aligns with Bauman (1989)'s characterization of modern administrative violence, where systems refine operations to maintain efficiency while obscuring destructive functions, and resonates with James C. Scott's observations about how state simplification schemes often produce unintended consequences while maintaining control.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. As a philosophical inquiry, our study emphasizes discursive frameworks over empirical documentation of specific bureaucratic practices. Our comparative approach, while illuminating shared logics, risks oversimplifying distinct historical and political contexts. The analysis remains largely within Western philosophical traditions, potentially limiting engagement with alternative epistemological frameworks. Finally, the perspective nature of our inquiry necessitates further empirical validation through detailed case studies and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Future research should pursue several directions. Empirical studies could document specific bureaucratic procedures through which the grammar of erasure operates. Comparative analysis could explore similar linguistic mechanisms across different geopolitical contexts. Research should engage more deeply with non-Western philosophical traditions, particularly those emphasizing relational ontologies as alternatives to classificatory violence. Practical strategies for disrupting the grammar of erasure within institutional settings could draw on Levinas (1969)'s ethics of alterity or Derrida (1995)'s deconstructive practices.

The broader implications extend to philosophical practice itself. If philosophy has been complicit in producing categorical frameworks that enable erasure, then philosophical practice requires fundamental reorientation toward modes of thought that resist totalizing classification. For genocide studies, our findings suggest greater attention to linguistic and bureaucratic mechanisms through which recognition is systematically deferred, moving beyond definitional debates to examine how debate structures themselves exclude certain forms of suffering.

Our analysis challenges the presumption that precise definitions alone resolve genocide recognition problems. While Meiches (2017) highlighted discursive constraints surrounding genocide talk, our grammar of erasure provides a more fundamental critique of language as an instrument of violence. Similarly, while Moses (2021) examined permanent security language, we demonstrate its operation through bureaucratic syntactical structures that transform life into manageable data. This suggests future scholarship must attend more carefully to micro-practices of bureaucratic classification enabling macro-level violence.

The grammar of erasure represents a fundamental challenge to understanding and responding to contemporary mass violence. By revealing how bureaucratic classification systems systematically erase certain sufferings from recognition, our analysis contributes to philosophy, legal studies, and human rights advocacy. This concept provides a framework for understanding violence operating not only through physical force but through linguistic and administrative structures, expanding genocide conceptualization beyond acts of commission to include systems of categorical erasure.

Ultimately, resistance becomes possible through developing alternative grammatical practices prioritizing recognition over classification, relation over categorization, and ethical encounter over administrative management. As Said (1978) demonstrated, struggling against erasure requires continuous effort to disrupt classificatory regimes. This demands not only theoretical critique but cultivating practical linguistic and bureaucratic practices that sustain difference without reducing it to manageable categories. The future of philosophy and genocide studies may depend on our capacity to imagine and instantiate new grammars of recognition.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The central paradox of contemporary genocide discourse manifests in its simultaneous proclamation of definitional contestability and its systematic reproduction of discursive closure. This tension transcends academic debate to reveal profound political implications, with the Palestinian case representing its most urgent contemporary instantiation. The field's oscillation between acknowledging complexity and demanding categorical certainty creates a structural double bind that renders Palestinian suffering perpetually debatable yet never actionable. As Meiches (2017) suggests, this bind operates not as an incidental feature but as a constitutive element of how genocide is discussed within institutional frameworks, ensuring that certain forms of violence remain suspended between recognition and denial.

Our analysis demonstrates that the critical task extends beyond perfecting genocide's definition to fundamentally unbinding the discourse surrounding it. The grammar of erasure reveals how bureaucratic and philosophical languages co-produce the very categories that enable systemic violence. Meaningful intervention therefore requires transforming the rules of speech to ensure Palestinian life is neither marginalized in academic discourse nor administratively absolved through procedural technicalities. This necessitates developing linguistic practices that resist converting lived experience into manageable categories, instead prioritizing ethical encounter over classificatory certainty. As Levinas (1969) reminds us, genuine responsibility begins with recognizing the face of the Other beyond all categorization.

Philosophy must reckon with its complicity in producing the taxonomical frameworks that facilitate rationalized erasure. The discipline's historical emphasis on clarity, systemization, and universality often mirrors the bureaucratic impulse to render existence administrable. Following Derrida (1995), we must engage in continuous deconstruction of the archive—interrogating not only what is articulated but the conditions that enable certain speech acts while foreclosing others. This meta-critical examination, as Foucault (1970) demonstrated, involves tracing how knowledge systems produce and naturalize power relations, particularly those that transmute human beings into security categories or demographic data points.

The grammar of erasure constitutes more than a linguistic phenomenon; it represents an ontological violence that fundamentally reshapes conditions of recognition and existence. By exposing how bureaucratic classification systems systematically erase Palestinian suffering from legitimate consideration, our analysis contributes to ongoing efforts across philosophy, legal studies, and human rights advocacy to foster more ethical engagement with mass violence. The future of genocide studies depends on cultivating practices of speaking and listening that can sustain alterity without reducing it

to manageable difference. This requires, as Said (1978) exemplified, speaking truth to power while simultaneously questioning the very terms through which truth and power are constituted.

Ultimately, resistance to erasure demands developing alternative grammatical practices that prioritize relation over categorization and ethical responsibility over administrative management. This involves not only theoretical critique but the practical cultivation of linguistic and institutional forms capable of acknowledging suffering without rendering it into data. The struggle against systemic violence must include sustained efforts to disrupt classificatory regimes, creating spaces where Palestinian existence can be recognized in its full humanity rather than through the reductive lens of security categories. In this endeavor, philosophy discovers its most vital purpose: not in producing perfect systems of thought, but in opening possibilities for more just and compassionate ways of being in the world.

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