# Rationale

After exploring a few opinion columns throughout Part 1 of the course, it was made clear to me that the genre lent itself perfectly to a mixture of humour and information that allowed for the attraction of a broad audience. Inspiration for the task is drawn from Bill Bryson’s 1999 collection of columns “I’m a stranger here myself”, which often contextualise criticisms and comical observations of American society with personal anecdotes.

Much of Bryson’s writing style is very hard to pinpoint, but there are a few clear features such as first person narrator, very precise and clear language, with very rich imagery, despite a seeming lack of metaphors. I partly attempt to replicate the aforementioned characteristics, but most importantly the general feeling the reader has after his stories: A chuckle and the feeling of having learnt something new.

The fictitious column is published in The Independent in 2016, so the story draws in an audience through its commentary on the American presidential race, as well as discussing some of topics seen throughout Part 1 of the course: For instance, the importance of knowing your target audience and consequently the tone, register and topics that can be explored; the change of language and the role of technology in how language has mutated; and language preservation, herein explored by the Brysonesque sharing of an interesting topic, namely the attempt to preserve Hawaiian Sign Language, which is intertwined with commentary about the race.

Word Count: 240

# Task

## Choice of words

Bill Bryson | Tuesday 5 September 2016

My English wife and I were due to celebrate our wedding anniversary, and this year we decided to stay in New England to see what our neighbouring cities had to offer. We chose to go to Boston. While taking a break from all the natural beauty, I found myself mindlessly skipping through TV channels and ran across this terrible conversation between a few political pundits discussing the level of the language used by presidential hopefuls.

They talked in length about speech pattern of various politicians and how well they would score in a Flesch-Kincaid readability test. If you, like me, don’t know what this test is – It analyses word and sentence length in order to categorise the difficulty of a text, assigning it a school level. To give some perspective, this paragraph so far was scored at roughly 9th grade.

One of the pundits, who I affectionately nicknamed Mr Roosevelt, was quite critical of the new deal in modern forms of communication and how seemingly uneducated the intellectual elite (or their definition of it) of our country has become. The most striking difference, as they pointed out, existing between candidates Sanders, 10th grade, and Trump, 7th grade. Considering some of these candidates, I’m more surprised that a grade can be given based on only 140 characters.

I have established again and again, in these very pages, that as I become older, memory turns into the memory of once having a memory. It also means that the short attention span we are required to have serves me beautifully, but I’ll truly never be sure whether it is because it fits with the blights of my old age, or simply that I have become a part of modern society.

I don’t know why, but I would love to live in a world where speech is never quite context appropriate. “Yo, Mr President, what up?” while certainly weird, has a nice ring to it. An 80’s screw ball comedy starring that one comedian with the face, who was fantastic in that one film.

Anyway, together with Mr Roosevelt from that dreadful programme was a linguist from the University of Washington (or perhaps it was from the University of Oregon, though definitely a state with never-ending rain), who seemed to be present in the conversation for the sole purpose of nodding her head and serving as the target to his seemingly endless attacks on “what has become of the English language”.

Surely this isn’t uniquely American. We cannot be the only nation on earth which somehow seem to enjoy this type of questionable journalism. Watching, or rather staring at, this delightful conversation felt like moving in with my parents at thirty. Delightful people, I’m sure, but life has moved on. I just don’t want to live with them any more.

You see, a linguist has plenty to contribute in a conversation about the decline of our language, but instead we prefer to watch someone validate our ideas and make us feel even smarter than our mothers told us we were. In fact, I felt so much guilt for not hearing what she had to say, that I ended up researching her and came across something incredibly interesting.

She was involved in a study in Hawaii attempting to discern and document Hawaii Sign Language. Although I am, admittedly, not as up-to-date on my research of sign languages as I should be, it turns out that there are a multitude of sign languages still being discovered, and of course these are under threat by the larger, more established languages. And so it goes.

There are hardly any speakers (or should I say signers?) of Hawaii Sign Language (HSL) left, with even fewer who use it regularly. Much the same way that some dialects and accents are seen as superior to others, and globalisation allows for easier learning and adoption of different speech patterns, the largest threat to Hawaii Sign Language’s existence is, naturally, American Sign Language (ASL) – being seen as not only more prestigious but also allowing for mass communication. ASL spreads not only within Uncle Sam’s contiguous land, but everywhere. Who would have guessed – spreading our golden arches to every country we can?

A divergence in geographical region usually leads to distinct shared knowledge and experience, which consequently lead to the creation and evolution of different words or signs. It would of course be silly to have five different words for snow living in the middle of sub-Saharan Africa, or a word for pineapple before its introduction to the USA. Eventually these differences become so prominent that a myriad of dialects surge, other more established dialects become languages, etc.

The glaring issue is that with so few speakers-signers of HSL around, there is virtually no argument on how to sign different words if others cannot remember it. Some might be made up, others could just be adaptations from ASL that shifted over time. And at the end of the day, the effort for maintenance of a language can become an effort to invent another in the process. It also raises many questions: Is it worth saving dying languages? Is convenience more important than differing cultures?

Now perhaps you are wondering how we have gotten to this point, but truly, all of this just made me wonder whether signed languages also suffer from people with ever decreasing attention spans. And if information is also being condensed and trimmed, and provided solely in 140 characters packets, which truly plague the older generations. Most importantly, I’m wondering whether signers are using the equivalent of the word “bigly”.

Word Count: 936

# Bibliography

Bryson, Bill. *I’m a Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to America after Twenty Years Away*. Broadway Books, 1999.