

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

## Language, Social Justice and the Media

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At the November 2012 AAA, the joint CfHR (Committee for Human Rights) and SLA Committee on Language and Social Justice, jointly referred to as LSJ, met to discuss current concerns and future possibilities for action. LSJ committee members focused on educational initiatives (including the completion of the website [teach.linguisticanthropology.org](http://teach.linguisticanthropology.org) with materials for teaching about accents, English Only, Mock Spanish, and related topics) and public outreach (including an AAA public education initiative on migration). Of particular concern was the development of strategies for getting involved in public discussions of language, for getting on the media Rolodex (to use the pre-digital term), and for finding effective ways to address and influence language in public and media policy.

Building on its success in persuading the Census Bureau to stop using the term “linguistically isolated,” LSJ members are currently examining and suggesting language to substitute for the proposed designator “limited English speaking households.” They are also working to develop support for continued funding for the American Community Survey which annually gathers data nation-wide on English language proficiency and on the use of languages other than English. There was also a brainstorming session on strategies for public education and engaging with media. LSJ members discussed possibilities for developing short, informative videos focused on one or two particular points. The central question throughout was, how do people with expertise on the socially embedded nature of language effectively talk to a public that generally takes reference as neutral and unproblematic?

### *Dropping the “I” word*

LSJ members were especially encouraged by the decision announced April 2, 2013 by the Associated Press to eliminate the term “illegal immigrant” from its stylebook. Associated Press Senior Vice President and Executive Editor Kathleen Carroll stated in an [April 2, 2013 blog entry](#): “*The Stylebook* no longer sanctions the term ‘illegal immigrant’ or the use of ‘illegal’ to describe a person. Instead, it tells users that ‘illegal’ should describe only an action, such as living in or immigrating to a country illegally”. The news release noted Carroll’s explanation that “the decision is part of the company’s on-going attempt to rid their *Stylebook* of labels,” and mentioned that the *New York Times* is considering a similar guideline revision. Above all, in describing some influences leading to this policy shift, the news release indicated “A coalition of linguists also came together last year to pressure media companies to drop ‘illegal immigrant,’ calling it ‘neither neutral nor accurate.’” The coalition of linguists consists of LSJ committee members; see [affiliated ABC/Univision October 1, 2012](#) “Linguists Tell New York Times That ‘Illegal’ Is Neither ‘Neutral’ nor ‘Accurate’”. The “Drop the I-Word” statement written by Jonathan Rosa and signed by committee members and affiliated concerned linguists can be found [here](#). Jonathan also represented these concerns in a panel discussion on MSNBC’s [Melissa Harris-Parry Show](#) on April 6, 2013. Nor is the AP alone in its decision. On April 10, *USA Today* announced it would only use the term “illegal immigrant” in direct quotes.

### *Still Plenty of Work to Do*

The immediately visible public response is disheartening, to say the least. Righteous anger appears to be the organizing principle, performed professionally on Fox and Friends and evident in the aggressively abusive responses to the AP story on the [abcnews.go](http://abcnews.go) website. “Political correctness” and “Leftist liberal media” are the mildest terms found in those responses, which feature abundant reference to illegality threatening the sacredness of nation (“breaking into my country”), conspiracy theories, equation of Obama with Orwellian group think, and so forth. The central point in all that visceral anger is the idea that somehow, by changing its policy, AP has in some deeply immoral way denied an obvious truth. All that certainly makes clear the hegemonic complexities of social, racial, and linguistic ideology in which people’s referential habits are embedded, and how much people interpret all that embedding in deeply naturalized moral terms. Such intransigent complexity, as it pertains to the current topic, is jointly laid out by [Jonathan Rosa](#), [Colleen Cotter](#), [Hilary Parsons Dick](#), and [Alejandro Paz](#) in the October 2012 anthropology-news.org Opinion column (Language and Culture): the “i-word” – “illegal immigrant” – in media reporting (Rosa) exemplifying the naturalization of hegemonic assumptions in state registers (Paz), embedded in neoliberal rhetoric (Dick) and believed by media to be natural and referentially correct (Cotter).

The role of linguistic anthropology in all this is pretty daunting, but one place to start is to build relationships with journalists. Colleen Cotter has taken initiative on this front, having organized a round table at the 2012 AAA meeting for journalists and anthropologists to address language and news practices, with

another proposed for the 2013 meetings. In addition to simply getting on the media Rolodex, linguistic anthropologists need to consider what their common referential ground is with media representatives. One complication lies in the recurring question of what the “correct” term of reference should be, and whether linguists are the kind of language experts who should be supplying them. If media representatives want terminology that is neutral and accurate, what kind of productive responses can we make, particularly when the topic is a highly charged one, as language-related topics often are. How do we best explain the issue of whose perspective counts in terms of reference for groups or language varieties, or how inequalities can be buried in terminology, and how none of this is a simple matter of reference?

All in all, many thanks to Language and Social Justice committee members for their thoughtful and sustained work, and a special shout-out to Ana Celia Zentella for keeping everyone informed and focused.

*Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA Contributing Editors **Aaron Ansell** ([aansell@vt.edu](mailto:aansell@vt.edu)) or **Bonnie Urciuoli** ([burciuol@hamilton.edu](mailto:burciuol@hamilton.edu)).*

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