

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Contesting Representations of Immigration

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(Immigration Discussion I) The “Drop the I-Word” Campaign from the Perspective of Linguistic Anthropology

From the Editor:

This piece is the first in a series of four pieces on the vital issue of immigration from the perspective of linguistic anthropology that will appear over the course of the next week. It is also the inauguration of a new set of formalized discussions on specific issues related to language and culture. It was a real pleasure to watch the conversations between the four participants of this immigration discussion, Jonathan Rosa, Colleen Cotter, Hilary Dick, and Alejandro Paz, and to see their pieces expand and sharpen in response to the comments of their fellow participants. Please let me know if you too would like to be part of one of these discussions. Leila.Monaghan (at) gmail.com

The “Drop the I-Word Campaign”

Ongoing debates about U.S. immigration reform have sparked calls for the media and the public to refrain from using terms like “illegals,” “illegal immigrants,” “illegal aliens,” etc. to refer to unauthorized migrants. As scholars who study the ways that language constitutes culture and vice versa, it is intellectually and ethically imperative for linguistic anthropologists to contribute to this discussion.

Much of the current debate surrounding this issue focuses on whether the term “illegal” is a truthful characterization of certain people’s migration status. For example, in the explanation that accompanied a 2011 update to the Associated Press Stylebook, widely regarded as the U.S. news media industry standard, Deputy Standards Editor David Minthorn suggested that “illegal immigrant” should be the preferred term because it is “accurate and neutral for news stories.” In contrast, organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists have described “illegal immigrant” as a “politically charged” phrase that should be reevaluated for its potential violation of the widely embraced journalistic practice of assuming innocence until guilt is proven. Others have made the related case that “illegal” is at best a misleading generalization, at worst a slur. A person diagnosed with cancer is not described as cancerous; however, “illegal” becomes a way of characterizing not just one’s migration status, but also one’s entire person. This perspective has galvanized a campaign to “Drop the I-Word.”

The “Drop the I-Word” campaign resonates with a central tenet of linguistic anthropology: language is a not merely a passive way of referring to or describing things in the world, but a crucial form of social action. Thus we need to ask: What forms of social action take place in and through popular representations of immigration?

One of the most noteworthy characteristics of immigration discourses is the naturalization of concepts such as “illegality” and the construction of immigration laws on as rigid, unchanging phenomena. Scholarship focused on this issue points out that “legal immigrant” is a redundant concept and “illegal immigrant” is oxymoronic, since the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act defines immigrants as people who have been lawfully admitted for permanent residence. The use of “migrant” throughout this statement reflects this insight. Moreover, immigration law has undergone dramatic shifts throughout U.S. history, with straightforward pathways to citizenship for some, but lengthy and laborious roads for others. The dynamic nature of this history is obscured by the notion that migrants simply opt to be legal or illegal. In fact, authorization should be understood primarily as a matter of political will rather than the individual choices of migrants themselves.

This misleading construction of illegality is tied to the circulation of troublesome stereotypes about the migration status of different ethnoracial groups. Specifically, assessments of illegality are often associated with unreliable signs of one’s migration status, such as language, religion, and physical appearance. These presumptions lead not only to law enforcers’ regular misidentification of people’s migration status based on wrongful assumptions about ethnolinguistic markers, but also to the broader public stigmatization of those markers. The popular sale of bumper stickers and t-shirts emblazoned with the words “Illegal Immigrant Hunting Permit” is just one example of the uptake of this stigmatization. The terrifying raids that are frequently carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement demonstrate that “illegal immigrant hunting” is an actual practice. These violent practices are patterned; many groups are the targets of hate crimes, but Latinas/os constituted 2/3 of the victims of ethnically motivated hate crimes in the FBI’s most recent annual report. Constructions of illegality are thus anything but “accurate and neutral.”

We must recognize that this debate is not merely a matter of policing language, or deciding whether one word or phrase is better than another. Nobel Peace Prize winner and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel's insistence that "no human being is illegal" is not just a claim about language. Simply replacing "illegal" with another term will not eradicate the legal connotations, historical erasures, ethnolinguistic profiling, and acts of violence described above. Only an understanding of how language functions as social action will allow us to develop new terminology that challenges anti-immigration perspectives successfully. While language change is not necessarily equivalent to social change, struggles over representations of immigration make it possible to imagine and enact an alternative politics of inclusion in this nation of immigrants.

Contextualizing and Reflecting on the "Drop the I-Word" Statement

I drafted the above statement in response to a dialogue among several fellow linguistic anthropologists and the coordinator of the "Drop the I-Word" campaign. The statement is intended to bring linguistic anthropological insights to bear on this conversation, with a broader public audience in mind. The question of audience prompted an engaging discussion regarding the framing of the statement. Some participants advocated for an explicit endorsement of an alternative term to the "I-Word," since this would likely be the most pressing concern for journalists and the broader public. For example, "undocumented" is a commonly preferred alternative to "illegal." However, Plascencia (2009) argues that the usage of "'undocumented' migrant...shares common assumptions with the term 'illegal' migrant, and thus it is also complicit in promoting the 'illegalization' that its development and deployment was seeking to negate" (2009:413). Using our disciplinary parlance, Plascencia's analysis speaks to the ways that ideologies of referentialism often miss the point in debates about terminology. In an effort to resist reproducing these referentialist perspectives, I attempted to emphasize the potential for this debate to challenge naturalized ideas about immigration and citizenship. Thus, the call to "Drop the I-Word" is a means to a much greater end.

Notwithstanding the use of new media (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6GcPft7mqU>; see also <http://www.nohomophobes.com/#!/today/> for another fascinating project), the "Drop the I-Word" campaign is in many ways reminiscent of previous struggles over terminology pertaining to categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability. The effectiveness of the campaign remains to be seen, but the stakes are certainly high. Despite the rise of anti-immigrant policies and sentiments in the post-9/11 era, the increasing U.S. Latina/o population raises important questions about potential transformations of the ways that U.S. citizenship is constructed vis-à-vis Latin America. In this sense, the campaign to "Drop the I-Word" should be viewed with an eye toward future efforts to secure migration rights across the Americas.

Media Response to the "I-Word Statement"

http://abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/linguists-york-times-illegal-neutral-accurate/story?id=17366512#.UGoRvhwsGiw

Reference

Plascencia, Luis F.B. 2009. The "Undocumented" Mexican Migrant Question: Re-Examining The Framing of Law and Illegalization in the United States. *Urban Anthropology*. 38(2-4): 375-434.

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