

3 **Contesting Representations of Migrant “Illegality” through the Drop the I-Word Campaign**

Rethinking Language Change and Social Change

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Language plays a key role in global public debates about migration, citizenship, and various forms of diversity. This chapter focuses on one particular debate surrounding representations of migrant “illegality” in the United States, examining how language can simultaneously provide a crucial vantage point from which to understand and contest the stigmatization of particular populations’ mobility, as well as the ways that language can function deceptively as a sign of exclusion and inequality. I explore the “Drop the I-Word Campaign,” a language and social justice initiative that calls for media outlets and broader publics to refrain from using the term “illegal” in representations of (im) migration. The “Drop the I-Word” campaign resonates with a central tenet of linguistic anthropology: language is not merely a passive way of referring to or describing things in the world, but a crucial form of social action itself. While language change is not necessarily equivalent to broader social change, struggles over representations of (im)migration can contribute to efforts toward imagining and establishing migration as a fundamental human right.

In September 2010, the racial justice organization Race Forward initiated the “Drop the I-Word” campaign in efforts to eradicate the use of the term “illegal” in reference to immigration, particularly among mainstream media outlets. They argued that, despite the word’s widely embraced usage, the language of illegality is an incorrect and stigmatizing way of representing immigration. A video that was released as part of the campaign states:

Calling a person “illegal” takes away their humanity. We can join our voices to ask media and government to drop the I-word now. The I-word derails real conversation about immigration and human rights . . . it’s racially charged, legally inaccurate, and morally wrong.

(Drop the I-Word 2011)

As the campaign picked up steam, members of the Society for Linguistic Anthropology’s Language and Social Justice Committee entered into dialogue with the creators of the Drop the I-Word campaign about the possibility of drafting a statement in support of their efforts. As a committee, we believed it

was our responsibility to challenge problematic claims that the use of the term “illegal” in reference to immigration among mainstream media is unbiased, neutral, or accurate.

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” (Novoa 2011b). Similarly, the Public Editor of the *New York Times* drew on this logic in a column titled “Readers Won’t Benefit if Times Bans the Term ‘Illegal Immigrant’” (Sullivan 2012). She argued that the phrase “illegal immigrant”

is clear and accurate; it gets its job done in two words that are easily understood. The same cannot be said of the most frequently suggested alternatives—“unauthorized,” “immigrants without legal status,” “undocumented.” Undocumented . . . has “a new currency” because of a federal policy change involving immigrants who came here as children 15 and under, so the word may be useful in that context.

(Sullivan 2012)

However, 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 (Plascencia 2009). My use of the term “migrant” throughout this chapter reflects this insight.

The language of illegality is far from neutral, and conservative political consultants have actively promoted its use. Recognizing the nefarious criminalization of particular racialized migrants, 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 (Novoa 2011a). Others have made the related case that “illegal” is at best a misleading generalization, at worst a slur (Garcia 2012). 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 galvanized the campaign to “Drop the I-Word.”

From a linguistic anthropological and language and social justice perspective, we might consider what forms of social action take place in and through language used in popular representations of immigration. One of the most noteworthy characteristics of immigration discourses is their naturalization of concepts such as “illegality” and the construction of immigration laws as rigid, unchanging phenomena (Santa Ana 2002; Dick 2011). These discourses frame migration status as a matter of individual choice rather than historically situated policies that have shifted over time. Dramatic shifts in immigration laws throughout U.S. history have created straightforward pathways to citizenship for some groups, but lengthy, laborious, or fruitless

roads for others (De Genova 2004). This is also true globally, where particular populations' mobility is seen as legitimate and even celebrated and other populations' mobility is highly surveilled or restricted altogether. Ngai (2004) shows how throughout U.S. history, policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, and the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 have strategically and nefariously made various migrants illegal based on particular historical, political, and economic circumstances. The dynamic nature of this history is obscured by the assumption 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.

The misleading construction of illegality is tied to the circulation of troublesome stereotypes about the migration status of different marginalized 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 signs of difference, but also to the broader public stigmatization of those signs. Thus, notions of illegality are not simply innocuous characterizations of migration status, but highly stigmatizing conceptions that are perilously mapped onto entire populations. Seemingly euphemistic invocations of illegality, such as in "illegal alien hunting permit" bumper stickers, are all too literal for people who have been targeted based on presumptions about their so-called "illegal immigrant" status. The terrifying raids that are frequently carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, modes of detention and deportation, the separation of migrant families, and border militarization demonstrate that "illegal immigrant hunting" is an actual practice (Hernández 2007; Marquez 2012). Marcelo Lucero and Luis Ramirez were both killed in separate incidents in which groups of mostly white teenagers sought to "hunt an illegal" (Hing 2009). These violent practices are patterned; rates of anti-Latinx hate crimes have surged in recent years (Romero 2016). Constructions of illegality are thus anything but accurate or neutral.

Taking into account these various perspectives, the Language and Social Justice Committee drafted a statement that was endorsed by dozens of linguistic anthropologists, published in *Anthropology News* (Rosa 2012), and mentioned by mainstream media outlets such as ABC News/Univision (Costantini 2012), CNN (Rodriguez 2013), and NPR (Demby 2013). Shortly thereafter, media outlets such as the Associated Press (Costantini 2013), USA Today (Planas 2013), LA Times (King 2013), and many others, changed their style guidelines, essentially dropping the I-word. In response, Race Forward, the organization that spearheaded the Drop the I-Word campaign, released a new video reporting these successes and reaffirming "the dignity and humanity of immigrants" (Race Forward 2015).

While on one level the Language and Social Justice Committee viewed this as a great success, as linguistic anthropologists we also knew that the eradication

of this word alone should not be equated with the kinds of broader social change for which pro-immigration reform activists had been advocating. This was evident in many media outlets' questions about what term to use instead of "illegal." Rather than simply replacing "illegal" with a less stigmatizing term, we must call into question the legitimacy of restrictive migration policies altogether such that there would no longer be a criminalized form of migration in need of a label. An engaging discussion took place among members of the Language and Social Justice Committee about whether to explicitly endorse 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, cultural anthropologist Luis Plascencia 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" (Plascencia 2009, 413).

In linguistic anthropological parlance, Plascencia's analysis speaks to the ways that ideologies of referentialism often miss the point in debates about terminology (Hill 2008). From a referentialist ideological perspective, each word refers to a concept in a unique way, so if that word is no longer used, then that concept is no longer referred to. However, many different words can in fact have similar social functions depending on the context of their use. Thus, a new word might in fact invoke conceptions of illegality and thus function in stigmatizing ways just as much as if not more powerfully than the term "illegal." While referentialist ideologies might lead one to think that the term itself is the problem, simply replacing "illegal" with another term will not eradicate the aforementioned legal conflations, historical erasures, racial and linguistic profiling, and acts of violence. 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. The declaration that "no human being is illegal" is not just a claim about language (Ngai 2006; Gambino 2015).

Longstanding histories of migrant illegalization demonstrate the ways that anxieties surrounding migrant mobility and their diversities are by no means new phenomena. This point seems lost in much of the recent work on so-called "super-diversity" in a range of language-related fields (Blommaert and Rampton 2011). This framework is based on the premise that we are witnessing a proliferation of "categories of migrants" and diverse language practices dramatically superseding that of previous historical moments. In contrast, Reyes (2014) suggests that "this speaker focus neglects a thorough conceptualization and interrogation of the listening subject: how change may not in fact begin with speaking subjects (migrants) but may be brought into being by listening subjects (those authorized to speak about migrants) and whatever anxieties and desires motivate the circulation of representations of speakers" (2014, 368). For Reyes, it is crucial to interrogate the ideologies of Otherness that inform gradations of diversity, positioning some populations as the norm and Others as "diverse" or "super-diverse." Reyes argues that we must locate

the production of linguistic “super-diversity” in the politics of positionality that structures perceptions of difference rather than in the empirical practices of migrant populations within a globalizing world. Other scholars warn that “if we approach globalization naively. . .we overlook the fact that words like ‘global’ and globalization’ in their most current use were first broadcast most aggressively by marketing agents and marketing schools” (Trouillot 2001, 128). From this perspective, “super-diversity” is part of a broader set of narratives about globalization that “not only silence histories of the world but also veil our understanding of the present” (ibid., 128). Building from these insights, we might interrogate the ways that the sentiments that inform the perception of super-diversity are linked to Otherizing discourses such as illegality.

We can also locate debates about “illegality” alongside previous domestic struggles over language used to characterize minoritized and marginalized populations. A more example, the website *nohomophobes.com*, tracks the use of homophobic epithets in new media in real time. While such enumerations might be imprecise (e.g., by not distinguishing between pejorative usages versus potentially critical or revalorized usages), they serve as an opportunity to challenge modes of linguistic stigmatization. Such struggles over language serve as opportunities to imagine and enact counter-hegemonic realities. Thus, the call to “Drop the I-Word” is a means to a much greater end.

We should also pay attention to the ways that the “Drop the I-Word” campaign is linked to other contemporary debates, including the troublesome call to “Drop the T” (Marcus 2015) from LGBT by mainstream gay (i.e., specifically cis white male) activists who seek to separate their identities from the increasingly emergent recognition of transgender populations.¹ “Drop the T” advocates operate from a zero-sum perspective in which newly gained visibility and rights for transgender individuals are understood to come at the expense of cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual groups. This view contradicts longstanding efforts toward building solidarity across marginalized populations, as well as intersectional approaches to understanding the ways that people simultaneously experience a range of identities in relation to matrices of domination. The irony of invoking the Drop the I-Word Campaign in efforts to Drop the T from LGBT was perhaps most glaringly evident when, in the summer of 2015, Jennicet Gutiérrez, an undocumented trans Latina activist, interrupted President Obama at a White House event celebrating LGBT Pride Month to draw attention to the administration’s record-setting rates of deportation (Rivas 2015). Drawing on an intersectional analysis of migration rights and queer liberation, Gutiérrez and others have noted that while privileged lesbian and gay populations might be enjoying increased access to marriage rights and other forms of societal inclusion, many queer people of color—especially trans people of color—face systematic forms of marginalization that are linked to the targeting and stigmatization of particular racialized migrant groups. Thus, for an undocumented trans Latina activist such as Gutiérrez, Obama’s record of deporting more than 2.5 million people during his two-term presidency—more than any other U.S. President in history—has earned him the moniker “deporter in

chief” (Marshall 2016). In fact, more people were deported by Obama than the combined total of all 19 U.S. presidents from 1892–2000 (Rogers 2016). The inhumanity of this record has reached new levels in recent years, in which the targets for deportation are increasingly women and children asylum-seekers fleeing violence in Central America. Of course it is important to note the history of U.S. political, economic, and military intervention in Central America, such that the presence of these asylum seekers is no coincidence, but rather, as journalist Juan González (2000) puts it, the “harvest of empire.” These histories were ignored in many of the public responses to the anti-Muslim migration orders that President Donald Trump issued during his first few weeks in office. It is important to see Trump’s efforts—including the profoundly inhumane policy of separating migrant children from their parents at the border—as the rearticulation of long-standing forms of racism and xenophobic migration policies rather than as exceptional or new phenomena.

In the context of the current political moment, we might also consider how seemingly opposing framings of “anchor babies” and “DREAMers” become linked to notions of illegality. From many progressive points of view, anchor baby is a highly stigmatizing term for a U.S.-born child of an unauthorized migrant parent and dreamer is a positive term for unauthorized migrant youth who have grown up in the U.S. for the majority of their lives. Through the invocation of the American Dream—which has, in fact, continually been a nightmare for various populations—and a blame the parent, not the child perspective, “DREAMer” discourses could inadvertently participate in the reproduction of notions of illegality and the broader forms of stigmatization to which they correspond. In order to stake a claim to authorized resident status or a so-called pathway to citizenship, these young people are recruited to simultaneously embrace the notion of the “American dream” and disavow their parents, doubling-down on their characterization as illegal aliens; that is, they must distinguish themselves from their families and promote the false notion of the American Dream. What, exactly, is the meaningfulness of the American dream and citizenship in the context of mass incarceration, mass deportation, extrajudicial violence, and extreme socioeconomic precarity?

In light of the emergence of movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and other efforts toward addressing profound structural disparities including extrajudicial violence, state-sanctioned violence, and the mass incarceration of African Americans in particular, it is curious that questions about the significance of citizenship are rarely posed. These forms of marginalization and violence are clear examples of the ways that populations can possess citizenship and yet still be positioned as second, third, or fourth class citizens. Connecting #BlackLivesMatter to the immigration debate, what reason do we have to believe that simply granting citizenship to the undocumented will do anything but position them as abject citizens, similar to African Americans, Native Americans, and other groups throughout the nation? For example, we must remember that there are millions of Latinxs who are U.S. citizens and yet still face profound forms of marginalization across societal

contexts, including employment, housing, education, the criminal justice system, and access to health care. These insights demand an analysis of the relationship between forms of incarceration, detention, exclusion, and expulsion as part of a broader, racialized process of disposability, dispossession, abandonment, and rightlessness. Rather than simply advocating for access to U.S. citizenship within a settler colonial state (re)produced through racial capitalism, we must continually seek to imagine and enact alternative political and economic orders.

These various discourses and debates highlight ways that language and social justice efforts can inform scholarly and popular understandings of communication, context, power, reproduction, and transformation. However, as I have sought to show in this chapter, there are a range of pitfalls associated with these efforts, not the least of which is the tendency to equate linguistic change with broader social change in straightforward ways. Thus, we remain faced with the task of drawing critical connections between communication and social transformation. This challenging undertaking will require interdisciplinary collaborations drawing on a range of critical approaches to the study of language, as well as community collaborations in contexts where forms of linguistic discrimination are most acutely experienced.

Note

- 1 Intertextuality and interdiscursivity have been important features of other intersectional campaigns, such as Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and undocumented queer activist José Antonio Vargas' call for undocumented people to "come out." This combines the slogan of "coming out of the closet" associated with queer communities, with the slogan of "coming out of the shadows" associated with undocumented communities.

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