Illegal or Undocumented: An Analysis of Immigrant Terminology in Contemporary American Media

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Does Terminology Matter?

Undocumented vs. Illegal: How Much Do Words Matter?
Research Questions

● Which terms do American media tend to use most frequently: *illegal alien*, *illegal immigrant*, or *undocumented immigrant*?

● How has immigration terminology in the media changed over time?

● Do *illegal immigrant* and *illegal alien* presume criminality in context more than *undocumented immigrant*?

● Which term is preferred in the media? *Illegal alien*, *illegal immigrant*, or *undocumented immigrant*?
Literature Review

- *Immigrant vs. emigrant* (Gabbacia, 2010)
- *Illegal* cannot be used to describe a person (only an action) (Paspalanova, 2008)
- When surveyed, the terminology typically does not influence people’s opinion (Caicedo, 2016; Merolla, Ramakrishnan, & Haynes, 2013; Ommundsen et al., 2014)
- Discourse framing and strategies may influence more opinion more than terminology (Mehan, 1997; Stewart, Pitts, & Osborne, 2011)
Method

- **Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, 2018)**
  - “Largest freely-available corpus of English”
  - “Only large and balanced corpus of American English”
  - “560 million words of text (20 million words per year)”
  - “Balanced equally between spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic texts”

- Analysis of the total usage from COCA, usage over time, and usage in specific media outlets

- Analysis of the assumption of criminality in 60 contexts (20 undocumented immigrant, 20 illegal immigrant, 20 illegal alien)

*https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/*
Results/Discussion of Contextual Analysis
Results: Top Media Term Preferences for Terms

Illegal alien: CNN, Fox, USA Today
From 2007-2015, Fox accounted for 37.5% of the usage of this term.

Illegal immigrant: Fox, CNN, NPR
After 2010, CNN and NPR stopped its usage of this term

Undocumented immigrant
NPR used this term 24% of its total usage
NPR used this term over 3 times as much as Academic Sources
CNN the third largest user of this term, following Academic Sources
Discussion: Media Term Preference

- Top three users of *illegal alien* 1990-2015: CNN, Fox, *USA Today*; term also used in academic contexts and fiction
- Fox started usage of term in 2003, *USA Today* in 2009
- CNN ceased usage of *illegal alien* in 2010
- Fox has used terms *illegal immigrant* and *illegal alien* regularly since 2006
- *Undocumented immigrant* used most by NPR, Academic Sources, and CNN
Results: Frequency of terms

Total tokens* of illegal immigrant terms in COCA: 1994-2015

*frequency usage
Discussion: Frequency of Terms

- *Illegal alien* and *illegal immigrant* were used more than *undocumented immigrant*...perhaps due to the newness of the latter term.
- *Undocumented immigrant* gained parity with the other two terms in 2014
- The usage of *illegal alien* and *illegal immigrant* increased in 2015
- *Illegal immigrant* and *undocumented immigrant* showed a balanced use in speech and in newspapers.
- *Illegal alien* was used in predominantly spoken contexts. Why?
Results: Usage Over Time

Use of *Illegal Immigrant* by Fox, CNN, & NPR from 1990-2015
Discussion: Usage Over Time

- Only terms *illegal alien* and *illegal immigrant* used before 1994
- Term *undocumented immigrant* not used until 1994, only 3 times a year until 2016, then used consistently after 2010
Results: Presumption of Criminality of Terms

Number assuming criminality from 20 contexts for each term
Discussion: Presumption of Criminality

- *Undocumented immigrant*: 30% of total usage in the media
- *Illegal immigrant*: 40%
  - Usage of above terms not statistically significant from term *undocumented immigrant*
- *Illegal alien* had a 75% presumption of criminality---more than usage of the terms *undocumented immigrant* and *illegal immigrant* combined
Limitations

- There was a limited number of contexts (60 total; 20 for each term) used for data analysis.
- Contextual analysis had a narrow date range (1994-2015).
- The above could affect how the terms were viewed over time; contexts of usage could be seen in a less negative light over time.
- Some term usage could have been used in the same text, thus potentially skewing the data.
Conclusions

- The terms *illegal alien* and *illegal immigrant* align semantically and pragmatically in their usage.
- *Illegal immigrant* assumes criminality 40% of the time, assuming non-criminality pragmatically but criminality semantically.
- Use of all terms tend to mark political affiliation.
- The rhetoric chosen by the media reflects societal viewpoints.
Implications

● We need to be aware of dehumanizing language, especially as it pertains to our EL population.
  ○ *Illegal alien* - The word *alien* frequently conjures an non-human entity, whereas *immigrants* are always human.
  ○ This explains the much higher usage of *illegal alien* in negative contexts.
Implications

- ELs are affected by the political climate in the USA.
  - Both terms, *illegal alien* and *illegal immigrant*, were largely in decline until 2015 when the immigration debate escalated.
  - These terms appear to be used more frequently once politically incorrect speech was normalized and widely accepted.
Recommendations

- More extensive search of the usage of the terms is needed, using a larger sample of their frequency of use in more media outlets and broader range of dates than in the present study.
- A qualitative component could be used in the replication of this study.
References


References


References
