# Language is used to sway voters in illegal-immigration debate

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Inside the hostile debate surrounding illegal immigration rages a powerful war of words each side uses as weapons to gain the upper hand.

The battle has helped shape the way voters view the complex issue and the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants who live in the United States. Each side uses language to leverage control of the debate, which is as much about semantics as substance.

Comments made last month by a state lawmaker, and the public's reaction, highlighted the impact that language has on the controversy and public psyche.

Terms and phrases such as "aliens," "path to citizenship" and "amnesty" are used by politicians and advocates on both sides of the illegal-immigration debate to evoke emotions and images that affect the way the public feels about the issue, linguistic experts say.

"Every word comes with ideas, and words have meanings, and the meanings have what are called frames, or mental structures," said George Lakoff, professor of cognitive science and linguistics at the University of California-Berkeley.

"Those mental structures define problems, limit possible solutions. They can create a view of reality that isn't real, or they can focus on views of reality that are real. They can tell truths, or they can lie. When you hear the words over and over, the ideas become part of your brain. What becomes part of your brain becomes common sense."

Language is an important part of any political debate, linguists say, and helps determine how any issue plays politically. Illegal immigration dominates as this season's hot-button issue, and the terminologies used on talk-radio shows and on election-season TV ads make it tough for people to sift through the rhetoric.

## Emotionally charged

In Arizona, illegal immigration is dinner-table talk. It splits families and friends, and it touches almost every aspect of our lives, from jobs to health care, from public safety to education. As the number of immigrants in the U.S. illegally has risen, so too has the tone of the debate.

The tipping point came last month, when Rep. Russell Pearce, R-Mesa, suggested that "Operation Wetback," a 1950s mass-deportation program, be reinstated to help combat illegal immigration.

The term "wetback" is offensive to Latinos and is typically used to refer to a person who is an undocumented immigrant who is still wet from crossing the Rio Grande, which forms the border between Texas and Mexico.

Pearce's use of the word and suggestion that the program be reinstated insulted minority, religious and community leaders who called for lawmakers to reject such divisive language.

"Language is not just about what is said, but understanding how words are viewed by others," Gary Kinnaman, a senior pastor at Word of Grace Church in Mesa, said after a news conference denouncing Pearce's remarks. "This is an emotionally charged issue . . . so I will guard my language."

In response, Pearce and his supporters said the comments were taken out of context and his opponents were taking political correctness to the extreme.

Pearce did not return calls for comment.

In previous *Republic* interviews on the issue, Pearce defended his comments and said he would not "rewrite history to make the silly leftists feel good," and that he didn't "care to be politically correct."

"I want to do what's right for America," he said.

## Evocative words

One side sees illegal immigration as a law and order issue and tends to characterize the debate with words such as "aliens," "amnesty," "invasion," and "anchor babies." The other side sees it as an economic issue of supply and demand, and tends to use phrases such as "earned legalization," the "American Dream," and "unauthorized workers."

Linguists said the terms and euphemisms used by both sides evoke distinctly different emotions and subconscious images. For example, when used as a noun, the term "illegals," implies that the entire person is inherently bad or criminal, not just the act. The word "aliens" could frame the people who are crossing the border as little green men from another planet.

Phrases such as "undocumented immigrants," "undocumented workers," or "unauthorized immigrants," seem less accusatory, and more compassionate, linguists said.

Representatives with immigration-control organizations, though, say those terms unfairly soften the debate.

"The term alien, far from being pejorative, is one that applies to you and me the minute we step out of U.S. soil," said John Keeley, director of communications for the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, D.C. "To substitute it with 'undocumented,' they're trying to launder the status of illegality."

Immigrant advocacy groups, however, disagree.

"We often say that the term 'illegal' is dehumanizing," said Brent Wilkes, national executive director of Washington-based League of United Latin American Citizens. "People commit illegal acts, or engage in illegal behavior . . . but the whole person is

not illegal."

Most of the time, entering the country illegally is considered a civil infraction typically handled by immigration proceedings.

The term "amnesty," gives the impression that Americans are a benevolent power, linguists said, and that on a certain day, millions of undocumented immigrants will be pardoned by a supreme moral authority.

On the flip side, the phrases "earned legalization," and "path to citizenship" portray the idea that with self-discipline and hard work, immigrants will be rewarded with citizenship.

## Making sense of the issue

"Anchor babies," is used to describe children born in the U.S. to undocumented immigrants, who under the interpretation of the law, would qualify for citizenship, and then become anchors for other family members to enter the country.

The phrase the "American Dream," meanwhile, evokes emotions of patriotism, and images of hard workers, opportunity and economic success.

The terms make it difficult for people like Raquel Gutiérrez of Tempe to make sense of the issue.

"Language generates reality," said Gutiérrez, 40, a leadership development doctoral student.

"And so the kind of language that's used is really important in framing any kind of conversation. Especially one that deals with so many people's lives. I'm not calling for neutrality, because I don't think any word is neutral. But I think we could use words that are a bit less destructive."

On the other hand, Elizabeth Rye of Phoenix said people have "just gone crazy," with political correctness.

"I don't think anybody wants to hurt people's feelings," said Rye, 61, a retired human services worker.

"We're just sick and tired of being overrun. I prefer to call somebody who's here in this country illegally 'illegal.' I think amnesty by any other name is still amnesty."

**Staff reporter Amanda J. Crawford contributed to this article.**

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