

THE WORDS OF JOURNALISTS MATTER

The language journalists use plays a critical role in how a reader or viewer understands the topic at hand. When it comes to immigration, phrases such as **“illegal immigrant”** and **“illegal alien”** influence audience perception by replacing complex circumstances with an editorial assessment of guilt.

When describing crime, a Stanford study (*Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning*, Paul H. Thibodeau, Lera Boroditsky, 2011) shows that word choice frames the debate about how to fight it. Similarly, when an immigrant is described by a news outlet as “illegal,” that frames the debate around immigration and how to address it.

The argument in favor of media outlets employing modern and accurate language is not one based on political correctness, but on the reality that for many situations, “illegal” in reference to immigrants is imprecise, polarizing, antiquated and inaccurate – as Supreme Court justice Anthony Kennedy has stated:

“As a general rule, it is not a crime for a movable alien to remain in the United States.”

Arizona vs. United States, June 25, 2012



There does seem to be a consensus against the use of the term by the people most affected by it, who happen to be a vulnerable minority seeking a better life, and that’s good enough for me. Personally, I’m dropping the use of the term “illegal immigrant.”

Jeffrey Toobin, *The New Yorker*, August 5, 2015

“Semantics may seem like a trivial part of immigration reform, but words, and their evolution, matter greatly in fraught policy debates.”

The New York Times Editorial Board, October 20, 2015



If describing the specifics of an individual’s immigration status is not possible, then alternatives such as “undocumented” or “unauthorized” offer options for neutral terminology.



“America has a big problem with illegal immigration, but a big part of it stems from the word ‘illegal.’ It pollutes the debate. It blocks solutions.”

Lawrence Downes, *The New York Times*, October 28, 2007



“But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”

George Orwell, 1984



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A border wall with Mexico would cost \$25 billion, and that’s not including the cost of negotiating property acquisition on private and tribal lands.
Source: The Washington Post



More Mexican immigrants have returned to Mexico from the U.S. than have migrated here since 2009.
Source: Pew Research Center



If mass deportation were enacted, U.S. GDP would drop by \$1.6 trillion.
Source: American Action Forum