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English II Honors with Dr. Henri Wood

Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric and Metaphors

Abstract

This paper examines how immigration discussions and laws are considered based on the rhetoric used in talking about and planning them. Specifically, it looks at how anti-immigrant rhetoric shapes the way a majority thinks about immigration and how that same rhetoric creates anti-immigrant laws such as Arizona Senate Bill 1070. The most controversial section of the bill, part 2B, states that officers have to stop anyone they suspect of being an immigrant and then detain or arrest that person if there is reasonable suspicion that the person is here illegally. Not only is that blatantly racist, the rhetoric of the bill is euphemistic, hiding that racism by using words such as “reasonable,” implying that there is some clear reason when to stop someone and ask for papers. This paper examines in detail how the law was discussed, debated, presented and then passed to determine how anti-immigrant rhetoric shaped it. This is relevant to everyone’s life because we all have a responsibility to recognize the wrong in this bill and in immigration portrayals. This anti-immigrant rhetoric is not only present in this law, but also in news sources and mainstream media. Recognizing anti-immigrant language is important for an overall understanding of the discussion on immigration.

“I’ve got a quick message for illegal aliens if you happen to be watching. You better start packing your bags. And to the politicians in Washington who are soft on illegal immigration, start packing up your office, because when the terrorists strike, which they will, and we find out that they’re here illegally from some other country, we will be telling all of you to get the hell out” (“Fear and Loathing”). Well-known conservative and radio host Glenn Beck often directs his show toward his hatred of undocumented immigrants, repeatedly saying that “every single illegal immigrant is guilty of a crime, every single one” (“Fear and Loathing”). This anti-immigrant rhetoric is common in conservative media and the message from those opposed to positive immigration reform is clear: Immigrants are harmful and unwelcome in the USA. Bill O’Reilly, another conservative media host also maintains that hatred: “Number one, the illegal aliens shouldn’t be here. And number two, the culture

from which they come from is a lot more violent than the USA” (“Fear and Loathing”). Commonalities flow through every comment made from such media outlets — they are largely based on biased assumptions rather than factual evidence. They portray immigrants as criminals, and are almost always referring to Latinos when they speak of immigrants. Neal Boortz, a conservative radio host, made this clear on his show when advocating for border control, stating he doesn’t “care if Mexicans pile up against that fence like tumbleweeds in the Santa Ana winds in Southern California. Let ‘em. You know, then just run a couple of taco trucks up and down the line, and somebody’s gonna be a millionaire out of that” (“Fear and Loathing”). Offensive stereotypes often play a key role in the media’s representation of immigrants, and those stereotypes quickly develop into common metaphors that are associated with immigrants in general. These metaphors, along with anti-immigrant rhetoric overall, are now part of the mainstream media as well. These depictions then carry over to society’s immediate “knowledge” of the immigrant, and then flow into the development of laws, namely the Arizona 1070 Bill. Arguably, the metaphors and anti-immigrant rhetoric that fill the media shape the way society perceives immigrants and go on to form the laws that respond to immigration.

How Metaphors Shape Society

Before examining the particular metaphors associated with immigrants it is important to understand how metaphors play a key role in the shaping of society. According to linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson, “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (55). The pair point out that metaphors are not just a figure of speech that come up in language and discussions, but rather, in our every thought and action. To break this down, we need to think about the discussions we have in our everyday lives, and then consider how many metaphors are within them. Lakoff and Johnson argue that we may not even be conscious of the constant metaphorical language we use because it is so prevalent in our everyday lives, such as “argument is war” or “time is money.” Thus, our everyday activities are structured by concepts that are metaphorical in nature (55-56). If human thought processes are metaphorical, and the human conceptual system is defined by metaphors, then the metaphors we create in society deeply affect how we perceive that concept or idea (Lakoff and Johnson 55). According to Otto Santa Ana, a sociolinguist

and professor of Chicana/o Studies at UCLA, “metaphoric processes are found across the entire range of human thinking, from foundational corporeal recognition of “up” versus “down,”... to higher- level activities such as... social institutional functioning, and social policy execution” (60). Thus, metaphors present in discourse shape the social perceptions and policy creations that come to follow. Such perceptions and laws can be directly attributed to the metaphors that built the concepts they respond to. Therefore, it makes sense “to focus on metaphoric representations in powerful practices of public discourse in the United States to comprehend the construction of Latinos” (Santa Ana 60) and immigrants as a whole.

Dominant Metaphors in Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric

In the ongoing national discussion on immigration, there are metaphors that are repeatedly used to define immigrants. These metaphors are what “Americans build their commonplace understandings and attitudes” upon (Cisneros 570). If society’s “conventional understandings of immigration are made concrete through metaphor,” then it is important to closely examine the core metaphors used in the representation of immigrants in addition to the language used in common anti-immigrant rhetoric (Cisneros 571).

One of the most common terms used to frame immigration discourse is “illegal aliens” (Cisneros 571). Undocumented immigrants are often simply referred to as “illegals,” and it is a trend often followed by much of the media. Many proponents of changing immigration rhetoric refuse to use this term to denote an immigrant, while The Applied Research Center has launched a campaign to end the term’s use: Drop the I-Word (Rubio). They argue that “the I-word opens the door to racial profiling and violence, and prevents truthful, respectful debate on immigration” (Rubio). It is important to separate a human being from the action that she or he has supposedly committed, in this case illegal entry into the United States. Simply calling a person “an illegal” because they are presumed to have committed a crime allows for the assumption that everything that person does and stands for is illegal and/or criminal. This prevents any positive attitudes towards immigrants because the terms used set them up, from the start, as wrong-doers. The “alien” portion of the phrase carries its own negative connotations as well. Aliens are commonly defined as space creatures, a mysterious and unknown entity in most people’s minds. There is pop culture surrounding alien takeovers and attacks, reflective of society’s collective anxiety about immigrants. Designating immigrants as “aliens” is affiliating them with hostile takeovers and mysterious, evil beings. Many immigration discussions denote immigrants as illegals or illegal aliens,

often making this view of them concrete in the minds of those following the conversation.

The clear designation of immigrants as illegal beings sets them up for negative associations with the law, and there are more metaphors that perpetuate and expand this view. Immigrants are commonly identified with metaphors of social deviance and criminal behavior. These metaphors are supported with reports of immigrants as serious criminals: Laura Ingraham of Fox News claimed that “13 or 12 people a day who are killed under DUIs by illegals — those people would be alive if our immigration laws were enforced” (Newbold). First of all, we have to question the statistics she claims. It is unknown where she discovered that precisely 13 or 12 people are killed a day, but once she declares that on the news, it remains in the heads of the viewers. Also, the people killed in these accidents weren’t killed because the people driving were “illegals,” but because the people driving were drunk. Citizens of the United States kill people in drunk driving accidents frequently, and the only crime is the fact that the drivers were driving under the influence. However, when it is undocumented people driving, the fact that they don’t have citizenship seems to be the crime that garners the most attention. This is an example of how the metaphor of immigrants as criminals distorts the accuracy of the information shared with the public. Not only does it distort the information shared — it consumes most of it. Out of 1,697 guests to discuss immigration on *Fox News*, 78% primarily discussed border security and enforcement and stories about immigrant criminality, while only 11% discussed immigration policy or reform (Newbold).

Distortion and consumption of media coverage is not the only problem with the “immigrants as criminals” metaphor. Perhaps the most worrisome problem is the falsehood of the connection. There is no evidence that undocumented immigrants are more likely to commit a crime than citizens of the country — in fact there is evidence to support that they are less likely to commit crimes (“Fear and Loathing”). Studies have shown that neighborhoods with higher immigrant levels are associated with lower crime levels and that “immigrants committed fewer crimes than native-born citizens” (“Fear and Loathing”). According to Mark Potok, a spokesperson for the Southern Poverty Law Center, “Latinos, and in particular undocumented immigrants are among the least likely to report hate crimes because they fear deportation” (qtd. in Rubio). Thus, immigrants are disproportionately being associated with criminal activity. But the media fuels this commonly held view, as expressed by Glenn Beck: “Every undocumented worker is an illegal immigrant, a criminal,” immediately categorizing “immigrant” with “criminal” (“Fear and Loathing”).

Another prominent metaphor that belittles immigrants is “immigrant as pollutant.” This metaphor lends itself to the visual anti-immigrant rhetoric that is fueled by the media. Many images depict the supposed common immigrant display of a group of huddled people, usually in a dark or shady area, looking chaotic and messy (Cisneros 571). Pollution creates a dirtier world and leaves behind a mess for others to clean up and worry about. By depicting immigrants as a source of pollution, it is framing them as persons who are less than human, who are leaving behind a permanent problem in society. Pollution is also criticized for the rapid, irreversible damage it does to the environment. Likewise, immigrants are metaphorically associated with “infectious diseases” and are often discussed in waves or pools of influx, describing them as “flooding in” at dangerous levels (Cisneros). This is depicted in the images of immigrants sneaking across the border or jumping fences — portraying them as an approaching danger. These images become ingrained in the minds of most Americans, allowing the growth of the collective anxiety toward immigrants.

Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric in the Mainstream

Anti-immigrant rhetoric and propaganda, once a feature of hate groups, “is now a part of the lexicon used by anti-immigrant advocacy campaigns, politicians and media figures considered mainstream” (“Immigrants Targeted”). This means that the metaphors and hateful rhetoric previously discussed is what is primarily fueled out to the public about immigration. Recognizing the mainstream trends of the propaganda means recognizing the fact that most Americans may only get biased information about immigration. This is made possible because many anti-immigrant extremist groups make their way into the mainstream media by being quoted and described as “anti-illegal immigrant advocacy groups” (“Immigrants Targeted”). This is dangerous because it allows for false information and hateful propaganda to be presented as truth to the American public.

There are many state level anti-immigration organizations, but there is a “Leadership Team” comprised of the heaviest anti-immigrant groups, all with connections to John Tanton, “often considered the father of anti-immigration” (“Immigrants Targeted”). He is a writer and anti-immigrant activist who sets up funding for many anti-immigrant organizations. This team, along with other statewide organizations, pushes their anti-immigrant agenda into mainstream media as much as possible. This rhetorical agenda includes: depicting immigrants as criminals, terrorists, and a danger to society while using dehumanizing language to depict immigrants “swarming” over the border in “hordes” (“Immigrants Targeted”). It also propagates conspiracy

theories about Mexican immigrants plotting to overtake the Southwestern states and blames immigrants for destroying American culture and quality of life (“Immigrants Targeted”).

Their agenda is important because it does not remain concealed in these hate groups—it instead circulates through the media. An example of a visual metaphor was an advertisement, printed in *The New York Times* and *The Nation*, showing a bulldozer knocking down a tree and busy traffic and argued that raising immigrant levels would cause “environmental damage, traffic congestion, higher taxes, severe strain on schools, emergency rooms and public infrastructure” (“Immigrants Targeted”). When considering how many Americans read these publications and trust in them to have accurate information, this anti-immigrant propaganda holds a lot of power in creating ideology and forming opinions. Another group published the following in their highly circulated newsletter: “Our country has been under assault from the influx of tens, if not hundreds of thousands of illegal aliens who have taken advantage of our lax enforcement of the law at the federal, state and local levels. These border crashers have contributed to rising crime rates, increasing burdens on our schools, hospitals and public services, and the very destruction of our American culture” (“Immigrants Targeted”). This example uses scary statistics and the term “illegal aliens” to demonize immigrants and sway its readers into fear and hatred of the immigrant population. Similar statements are made and published in most other mainstream media outlets, including *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Fox News* (“Immigrants Targeted”). *Fox News* has exceeded most of the media in its constant anti-immigrant rhetoric used on air. They often host anti-immigrant extremists as guests and are notorious for their use of anti-immigrant slurs, such as “illegal alien” and “anchor baby,” the derogatory term used to describe the children of undocumented immigrants serving as anchors to keep their parent in the country (Newbold).

If these anti-immigrant groups have successfully integrated themselves into mainstream media, the problem of propaganda versus truthful news arises. While the public should always check multiple news sources to get the most accurate reports possible, this proves to be a difficult task after examining how well the anti-immigrant groups have infiltrated the media. *Media Matters*, a prominent online news source, focuses on “illustrating skewed or inadequate coverage of important issues, thorough debunking of conservative falsehoods that find their way into coverage.” Thus, it is fair to say that most of the American public, unless doing extensive research or following news sources such as *Media Matters*, only take in the anti-immigrant rhetoric held throughout most media sources. This being said, it is easy to make the

connection between anti-immigrant rhetoric and society's general weariness, if not hatred, of immigrants. The dehumanizing language used in immigration rhetoric directly creates the dehumanizing treatment immigrants receive. As Dr. Miguel Carranza, professor of Latina/Latino Studies at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, puts it: "With these types of negative metaphors/markers it makes it easier for groups to treat 'those aliens' as less than human so they have no human rights and we can treat them as inhumanely as we like" (Carranza). The rhetoric and metaphors being fueled into the minds of the general public by the anti-immigrant coverage has formed their thoughts and shaped the concept of what an immigrant is, what an immigrant does, and how an immigrant lives and affects the country. As previously examined, metaphors shape the concepts, the thoughts, the acts of our everyday lives, and the anti-immigrant heavy media has succeeded in shaping the minds of most Americans.

Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric Into Law Process

Allowing this rhetoric means perpetuating the falsehood and skewed perceptions the media creates. These perceptions not only affect the social treatment and general public's perception of immigrants, but also the more formal discussions on immigration reform. Dr. Carranza believes "since anti-immigrant rhetoric is most often illogical and divisive, it makes it [almost] impossible for people to talk about viable ways to approach immigration reform." This is perhaps the goal of many anti-immigrant rhetors in addition to pushing anti-immigrant law action. Consequently, it's common to see the creation of laws and reformation supporting anti-immigrant rhetoric. "If the rhetoric creates the social situation that says we are under siege and being overwhelmed by aliens and we as citizens believe the media, then it follows that politicians will try to establish bills, amendments, policies, etc. in order to be depicted as true Americans who will do anything to protect our country" (Carranza). Thus, the reform becomes limited to a black-and-white dynamic. As Dr. Carranza puts it: "either you are 'too soft' and you want to have open borders, or you are 'too hard' and unreasonable and want to rid our society of these aliens by any means possible."

Here, I will particularly examine how Arizona's Senate Bill 1070 maintains the anti-immigrant rhetoric discussed. The law asserts that it will "discourage and deter the unlawful entry and presence of aliens and economic activity by persons unlawfully present in the United States" (S. 1070). By simply including the anti-immigrant term "alien" it makes clear the standpoint of the bill and the anti-immigrant path it intends to encourage. Additionally, the

repetition of “unlawful” emphasizes association with crime and illegality. Supporters of the law argue that it’s necessary because Arizona hasn’t done anything to protect its residents from “illegal aliens” (Coskan-Johnson). Again, the connection between the support of this bill and anti-immigrant rhetoric comes out: the supporters feel they need protection from immigrants—going back to the metaphor of immigrants as criminals and a source of danger. It is unclear exactly how they feel their safety is being compromised, again perpetuating the illogical nature of the metaphor.

S.B. 1070 article 8B declares: “For any lawful contact made by a law enforcement official or agency of this state or a country, city, town or other political subdivision of this state where *reasonable suspicion* exists that the person is an alien who is unlawfully present in the United States, a *reasonable attempt* shall be made when *practicable*, to determine the immigration status of the person [emphasis added]” (Coskan-Johnson). Again, the term “alien” is used to describe an immigrant, which is the word of choice throughout most of the bill. The emphasis on the words *reasonable* and *practicable* serves its purpose by making clear the sheer ridiculousness of this section. In no way can anyone ever make a reasonable guess at whether someone is an immigrant or not, and whether they have either a documented or undocumented status. It is not “reasonable” to ever make such assumptions, but the bill uses this language in an attempt to boost its legitimacy. According to Dr. Carranza, “it codifies in a legislative statute that state government can use aspects such as ‘profiling’ and the use of not only ICE, the federal law enforcement specifically created to control immigration, but local, state, regional law enforcement agencies, who were not trained or hired for such purposes.” Thus, the bill accepts racial profiling as an allowed tactic and it arguably sets apart Latinos as the main suspects. Opponents of the bill likewise say that “it gave police the legal right to harass people of color” (Coskan-Johnson). The bill supports the anti-immigrant rhetoric by building a case against immigrants and urging all undocumented people to be revealed and punished by any means necessary. With the support of anti-immigrant groups discussed earlier, this bill makes sweeping generalizations and stereotypes to dehumanize immigrants, which causes a rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric, pushing the message of “intolerance” (Coskan-Johnson). The metaphors depicting immigrants as a danger and harm to society ring clear in this bill, which is supported by those who have allowed these metaphors and anti-immigrant rhetoric to shape their thoughts.

Immigration is a topic of discussion in our nation that will remain prominent for many years to come. It’s currently being shaped as a black-and-white conversation: for immigrants or against them. The anti-immigrant rhetoric and metaphors negatively associated with immigrants allows the

discourse to continue in this manner. These metaphors and rhetoric provide most of the media coverage and information the public has on immigration, creating a lot of misinformed minds to further participate in anti-immigrant rhetoric. Anti-immigrant organizations and leaders work to create laws that perpetuate anti-immigrant trends, and if most people have shaped their views based on these common depictions of immigrants, these laws will be supported. With anti-immigrant rhetoric and metaphors consuming the discourse about immigration, “it makes the ‘difficult dialogues’ that are absolutely essential for any reform to occur impossible to take place” (Carranza).

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