

The Upside of Accents: Language Differences and Attitudes Toward Immigration

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Abstract

Note to readers: this is an extended version of a report I submitted to the Russell Sage Foundation on October 31st, 2010, which explains its empirical emphasis. Please do not cite without permission.

When discussing immigration, Americans commonly mention concerns about language. Yet the dominant theoretical approaches to immigration attitudes have been shaped by theories of racial attitudes, and only infrequently consider language differences. This research uses two survey experiments to explore the relative impact of race- and language-related cues on immigration attitudes. The first experiment investigates how 2,063 nationally representative Americans' attitudes change when news clips show immigrants of varying skin tone or English fluency. Unexpectedly, an immigrant speaking English with a strong accent elicited more support for a pathway to citizenship than an individual speaking fluent Spanish or fluent English. A second survey experiment of 1,137 reinforces the original findings. By speaking with a pronounced accent, immigrants may be perceived as signaling a willingness to assimilate. Immigration attitudes parallel racial attitudes more in the types of mechanisms through which they operate than in the specific cues which influence them.

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Introduction

Research on attitudes toward immigration is commonly framed as a contest between cultural and economic explanations (e.g. Dancygier, 2010; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010, 2007; Sides and Citrin, 2007; Schildkraut, 2005; Sniderman, Hagendoorn and Prior, 2004; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001). Do immigrants threaten long-time residents because of the possibility of competition for scarce resources, or instead through their perceived cultural impacts? Yet when studying the United States, research has not been as attentive to discovering the types of cultural distinction that are influential (but see Newman, Taber and Hartman, 2010; Schildkraut, 2005). This research thus uses a survey experiment to explore the impact of two non-economic aspects of immigrant distinction on attitudes toward immigration: language differences and skin tone.

Native-born Americans commonly express concerns about the use of Spanish in their communities, a fact which has been uncovered in repeated case studies of new immigrant destinations (Grey and Woodrick, 2005; Deufel, 2006; Paxton, 2006; Kotlowitz, 2007; Hopkins, Tran and Williamson, 2009). Such concerns have made it as far as the U.S. Senate, where former West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd argued in 1992, “I pick up the telephone and call the local garage. I can’t understand the person on the other side of the line... They’re all over the place, and they don’t speak English. Do we want more of this?” (New York Times, 1992). Yet we do not know if Spanish is in fact generating local inter-group tensions or if it is simply providing a means of expressing concerns with other roots. To the extent that Spanish is influential, this research also aims to learn why. Is it because the use of a foreign language (or even thickly accented English) signals out-group membership (Sniderman et al., 2002; Tajfel, 1981), or because of Americans’ concerns about their inability to communicate with their neighbors (Newman, Taber and Hartman, 2010; Schildkraut, 2005)? Would Americans punish an English speaker with a foreign accent due to the salience of inter-group differences (Gluszek and Dovidio, 2010; Tajfel, 1981), or might such an individual be rewarded for making the effort to speak English?

Language is not the only way that immigrants might be distinctive from the native-born population. Research on Europe has considered the possibility that immigrants’ skin tones—or, more broadly, their racial backgrounds and countries of origin—influence immigrant-related attitudes (e.g. Card, Dustmann and Preston 2005; but see Sniderman et al. 2002). Within the U.S., research has shown that Americans associate positive social traits with lighter skin tone (e.g. Blair, Judd and Fallman, 2004; Caruso, Mead and Balcetis, 2009). This paper considers whether similar biases affect attitudes toward immigrants—and, more generally, the extent to which biases that pertain to African Americans operate with respect to Latino immigrants as well.

As another example of potential cross-over, past research has shown that attitudes toward African Americans are powerfully influenced by perceptions of effort and the willingness of African Americans to adhere to work-related norms (Gilens, 1999; Kinder and Sanders, 1996). Similar norms might influence attitudes toward immigration, whether they are norms related to work or to perceptions of immigrants’ desire to assimilate. It is plausible, then, that attitudes toward immigration will parallel attitudes toward race not in the cues that influence them but in the perceptual mechanisms through which they are influenced. Immigration-related cues might vary in their impact depending on what they communicate about immigrants’ adherence to norms or expectations.

Design of First Experiment

To address these issues, the researcher developed a battery of questions to be administered before and after viewing a 41-second video detailing a proposal on immigration policy. The research made use of Knowledge Networks, a survey firm which maintains a nationally representative panel of American respondents recruited through random-digit dialing. In all, 2,063 respondents completed the survey during the period from August 6th to August 23rd, 2010.¹ Past research has shown that respondents differ in response to race-based cues depending on the extent to which they are concerned about social desirability (e.g. Mendelberg, 2001), so the survey began with a set of questions on self-monitoring administered to a subset of respondents. These self-monitoring questions measure the extent to which the respondent typically tailors her expressions based on others' likely responses.

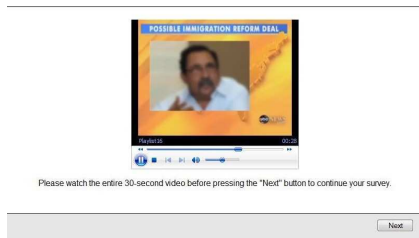


Figure 1: August 2010: Immigrant with dark skin tone

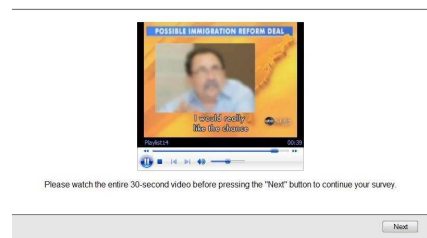


Figure 2: August 2010: Immigrant with light skin tone

The video was adapted from a May 2007 ABC News clip, and was professionally edited to ensure its realism. A full transcript is available below. In the video, the news anchor describes a policy to provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, and then shows a clip of an immigrant advocating for the policy. The immigrant is shown via a blurred photograph, a common practice when presenting undocumented or illegal immigrants. The underlying image was chosen to signal middle-class status, including the fact that the immigrant wore an open, collared shirt. Although the pictures were identical, the immigrant's skin tone was varied substantially, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 3 shows that the skin tone manipulation was in fact perceived by respondents, who were more likely to say that the immigrant was from Central America (as compared to Mexico) as a result. For each experimental group, the figure illustrates the estimated change from a respondent exposed to the English-language treatment. This figure excludes the control group, as people who did not see the video cannot make guesses about the immigrant depicted therein. It uses thick vertical lines to present standard deviations and thin vertical lines to depict the 95% confidence intervals. The number under each treatment indicates the corresponding one-sided p-value testing whether the treatment effect differs from the baseline group.

The language-based groups show no significant differences in their perception that the immi-

¹4,648 respondents were invited to take the survey, for an RR3 panel response rate of 44.3%. The original panel recruitment rate from the nationally representative sample was 17%, meaning that 17% of those drawn from a nationally representative sample via random-digit dialing agreed to participate. Of these, 62% actually completed the process to join the panel, producing an overall response rate of 5%.

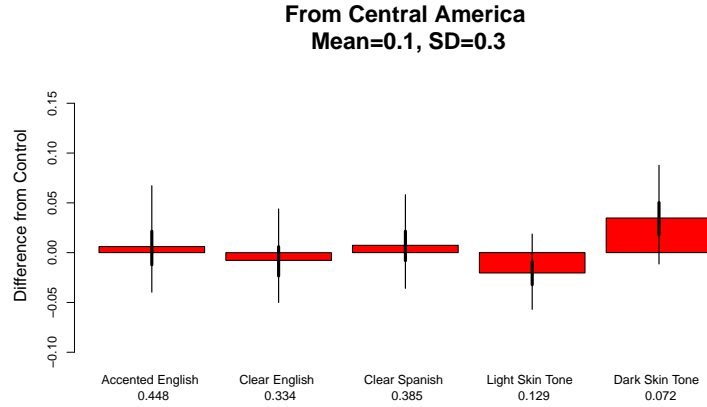


Figure 3: August 2010: Is the immigrant from Central America?

grant is from a Central American country such as Guatemala. But those who saw a dark-skinned immigrant are 5.6 percentage points more likely to indicate that he is from Central America than those who saw a light-skinned immigrant.² In fact, the one-sided p-value that the dark skin tone had a positive impact as compared to the light skin tone is 0.01.

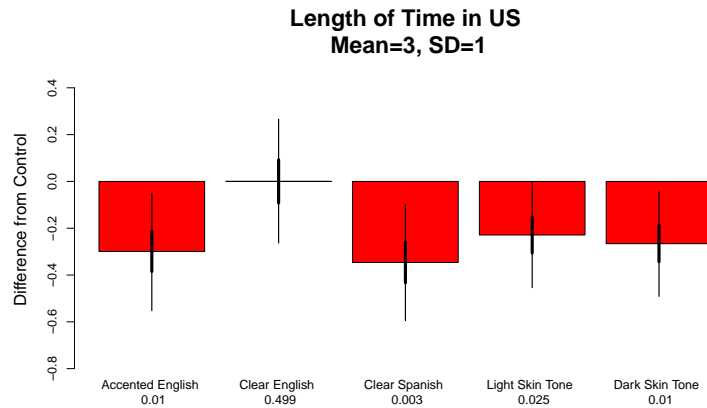


Figure 4: August 2010: Differences in perception of immigrant's time in U.S.

The second random manipulation was the voice-over used for the undocumented immigrant. In all cases, the immigrant's words were presented via subtitles, so the images observed by respondents were identical. However, in one case, the immigrant spoke with only a very slight accent. (Here, the voice actor used was a male, a long-time U.S. resident, and a native Spanish speaker.) In the second treatment, he instead spoke fluent Spanish, while in the third, he spoke English with a marked non-native accent. To hold as much as possible constant, the same Mexican voice actor was used for these latter two conditions. All of the videos are publicly available

²The 95% confidence interval runs from 0.8 percentage points to 10.9 percentage points.

at <http://www.youtube.com/user/immigrationsurvey>.

Respondents were able to perceive these differences, as shown in Figure 4, where again the fluent English-speaking treatment is the baseline. Those respondents who were exposed to the fluent English speaker were markedly more likely to indicate that the immigrant had been in the U.S. for a long time as compared to the other treatments. For example, the 0.35 gap on the 1-5 scale between those who heard fluent English and those who heard fluent Spanish translates into an effect that is 35% of the dependent variable’s standard deviation.³ There is no significant difference between the Spanish speaker and the accented English speaker: both were perceived to have spent less time in the U.S. Nor do skin tone changes produce differences in perceptions of the immigrant’s time in the U.S.

Experiment 1 Results

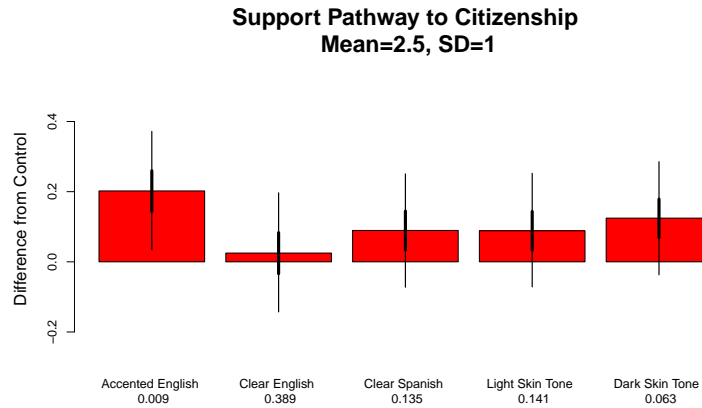


Figure 5: August 2010: Support for Creating Pathway to Citizenship

Immediately after viewing the video clip, respondents were asked whether they approved or disapproved of the proposed policy it had detailed. Specifically, the question asked, “Do you support or oppose a national policy of allowing illegal immigrants already living in the United States for a number of years to stay in this country permanently and earn U.S. citizenship?” Figure 5 presents the estimated treatment effects as compared to a control group that saw no video. Positive red bars indicate increased support for a pathway to citizenship, while negative red bars indicate the reverse. There is no discernible difference between being exposed to fluent English and fluent Spanish: both lead to slight but statistically insignificant increases in support as compared to someone who saw no video. However, the accented English voice-over produced a marked *uptick* in support for a pathway to citizenship. Support is measured on a 1-4 scale, with “1” indicating strong opposition and “4” indicating strong support. The median difference between the “accented English” treatment and control condition is 0.20, with a 95% confidence interval from 0.03 to 0.37. Given that the dependent variable’s standard deviation is 1.02, these

³The effect’s 95% confidence interval spans from 0.13 to 0.55.

results are substantively as well as statistically significant. *Those exposed to an immigrant speaking accented English are markedly more supportive of creating a pathway to citizenship than those exposed to fluent English or fluent Spanish.* There is not a detectable difference between respondents who saw an immigrant with light skin tone and those who saw an immigrant with dark skin tone, as the final two bars of the figure illustrate.

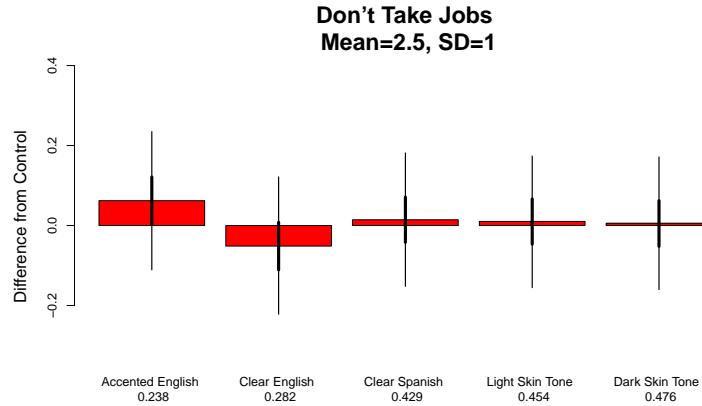


Figure 6: August 2010: Believe immigrants don't take jobs from native-born Americans

Why might that be? Multiple hypotheses would expect that an immigrant speaking accented English would generate more favorable opinions than one speaking Spanish. But it is less clear why the thick accent generated more pro-immigration attitudes than did fluent English. One indication comes from the fact that similar treatment effects are detected on some but not all of the other immigration-related questions. For instance, we detect no discernible impact of any treatment on job threat (see Figure 6), indicating that the fluent English speaker is not inducing respondents to be more worried about their own jobs. We also detect no discernible impact on perceptions of immigrants' connection to crime or to higher taxes (not shown). Yet we do observe that those who heard the "accented English" treatment are markedly more likely to agree that "the growing number of newcomers from other countries strengthens American society." Figure 7 illustrates this effect. This observation suggests that the use of accented English triggers a sense that immigrants contribute to the U.S. Accented English indicates a level of effort to speak English, and perhaps signals a desire to assimilate. By contrast, skin tone again has no demonstrable impact.

Confirmatory Experiment

The results of the initial experiment are counter-intuitive: *ex ante*, we might have expected the use of Spanish to generate anti-immigration attitudes (e.g. Newman, Taber and Hartman, 2010; Hopkins, Tran and Williamson, 2009; Barreto et al., 2008), rather than observing that accented English produces pro-immigration attitudes. In late January 2011, we thus conducted a second experiment designed to test the robustness of the core finding, to further understand respondents'

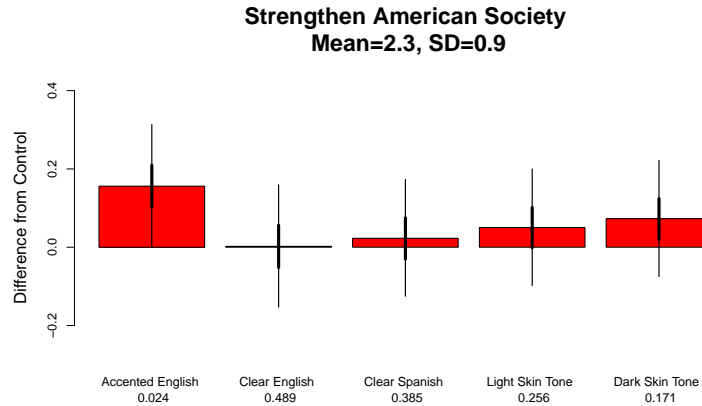


Figure 7: August 2010: Believe Immigrants Strengthen American Society

perceptions of the treatments, and to better identify the mechanisms at work. As with the original experiment, this follow-up survey was conducted through Knowledge Networks, meaning that the sample is drawn via random digit dialing methods. The sample size was 1,137.⁴

Aside from its smaller sample size, the second experiment made a few modifications to the design and experiment above. The use of an accent could influence attitudes because it signals a willingness to assimilate, but also because it signals the speaker’s region of origin and time in the U.S. A fluent English speaker who is nonetheless an undocumented or illegal immigrant might be atypical, and could even evoke negative responses given that he has not naturalized despite many years of residence. To reduce this heterogeneity, the updated video introduced the immigrant by adding that “[h]e came here ten years ago from Mexico.” Also, to ensure that responses were not specific to the image of the immigrant used in the first experiment, this experiment used a separate image of a Hispanic male shown in Figure 8. Here, there was no skin-tone treatment and no control group: respondents were assigned with equal probability to hear an immigrant speaking fluent Spanish, accented English, or fluent English.

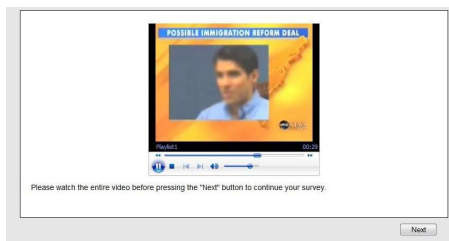


Figure 8: January 2011: Image of Immigrant

This experiment also inquired about the strength of the speaker’s accent, to ensure that the

⁴The initial response rate to the request to join the panel was 16%. The panel recruitment rate was 44.3%, as 2,564 panelists were invited to take the survey. The 2,063 panelists who had completed the prior study were excluded, out of a total panel of approximately 50,000 people.

fluent English speaker was not perceived as an interpreter. 97.8% of those who heard the thick accent thought the the speaker had an accent of some sort, while 63.6% of those in the “fluent English” condition reported hearing an accent. There was a slight increase in the percentage who were not sure if they heard an accent, from 7.8% in the “accented English” condition to 11.8% in the “fluent English” condition.⁵ Thus a significant majority of respondents perceived the fluent English speaker as we intended: they saw him as an immigrant, speaking in his own words, with a slight but discernible accent.

The sample size here is only half that in the prior experiment, so we have to be especially careful to focus on the observations where the treatment effect is likely to be operating. The initial survey shows that the positive treatment effects of accented English and the comparatively negative effects of fluent English are both dampened for Hispanics, so 89 Hispanic respondents were omitted. Respondents who left the video early would not have heard the voice-over at the end, so the analysis removes 90 complete respondents who left the video prior to the 40-second mark when the voice-over began. Younger respondents and more conservative respondents were less likely to skip the video, but no other covariates systematically predict who did. Importantly, none of the treatment assignments predict who left the video screen early, which is as we would expect for a pre-treatment variable.

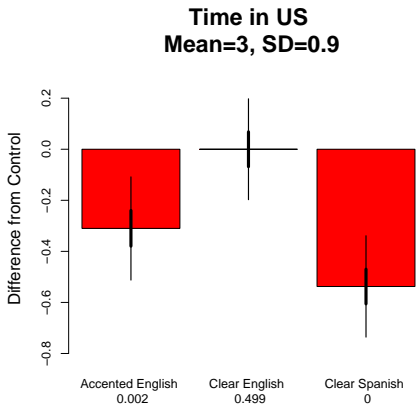


Figure 9: January 2011: Time in U.S.

Finally, the initial experiment showed stronger results for those who completed the questionnaire within one half-hour, presumably because these respondents did not stop to do other activities in the middle of the survey. As the time from the treatment wanes, so too should its potential effects. We thus remove 154 people who did not (in all likelihood) take the survey in one sitting, defined as those who took more than one half-hour to complete the survey. Among this group, the median number of minutes spent on the survey was 1,224—or 20.4 hours—indicating that these individuals put nearly a day between initiating the survey and answering its 11 questions. Here again, none of the treated groups is more or less likely to induce respondents to leave the survey for other activities. Specifically, the two-sided p-values from bivariate logistic regressions

⁵The corresponding p-value from a two-sided t-test is 0.07.

in which each treatment group is used to predict failure to complete the survey quickly are 0.51 (accented English), 0.83 (fluent Spanish), and 0.88 (fluent English). Dropping this group is thus unlikely to induce bias in the experimental estimates.

As in the prior experiment, we asked respondents how long the immigrant had been in the U.S. The impact of the different treatment assignments is shown in Figure 9. Even though respondents were told explicitly that the immigrant came to the U.S. 10 years ago within the video, the use of clear English led respondents to suspect that the immigrant had been in the U.S. for markedly longer periods of time. In fact, the difference between the fluent English and fluent Spanish treatments is *larger* than in the previous experiment, with a mean of .54 (on a 1-5 scale) and a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.34 to 0.74. Thus the language manipulation continues to signal the immigrant’s length of time in the U.S.

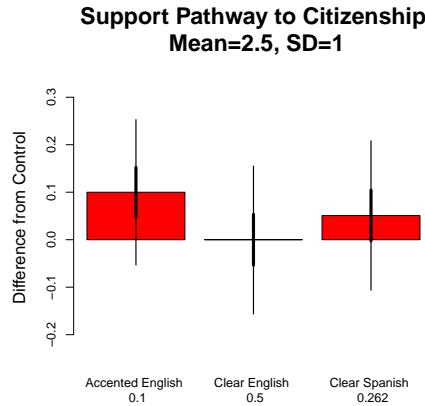


Figure 10: January 2011: Support Pathway to Citizenship

Having defined the population and considered how respondents perceived the manipulation, we then estimated the same model of immigration policy attitudes as that presented above, with the results shown in Figure 10. The baseline is respondents who heard the fluent English voice-over. The figure confirms the counter-intuitive trend from above: Americans who heard accented English are the most supportive of a pathway to citizenship, and they are more supportive than those who hear fluent English in 90 out of 100 simulations, for a one-sided p-value of 0.10. The average impact of accented English is not as large as that detected above: here, it is 0.10, with a 95% confidence interval from -.05 to 0.25. This average treatment effective is approximately half the size of that detected above. Still, the striking pattern reappears in a survey with different respondents administered six months later. Those respondents exposed to accented English are the most supportive of creating a pathway to citizenship. Even with explicit information about the immigrant’s country of origin and timing of arrival, respondents nonetheless draw conclusions about these factors from hearing an immigrant speak. It is not simply that speaking a foreign language is penalized, or that speaking fluently is rewarded. Instead, hearing accented English prompts more support for creating a pathway to citizenship.

Conclusion

Language differences influence immigration-related attitudes, with speakers of accented English inducing more support for a pathway to citizenship and more agreement that immigrants strengthen American society. Skin tone manipulations have no strong impacts. Together, these results suggest that the cues that influence immigration-related attitudes are quite different from the cues that influence race-related attitudes. Yet they also suggest a way in which racial attitudes are parallel to attitudes on immigration: in both cases, perceptions about effort and deservingness appear to influence Americans' policy preferences.

This research also points the way toward productive future studies. Are responses similar to immigrants from different linguistic backgrounds, such as Japanese or Chinese speakers? Also, in the experiments detailed here, the immigrant offers a pro-assimilation message. Does the way the immigrant speaks interact with the message he or she is offering? Future research might consider the other ways that immigrants signal a willingness to assimilate, either individually or collectively. It might also consider racial or skin tone differences among non-Latino groups, such as immigrants from Africa.

Appendix A: Additional Results

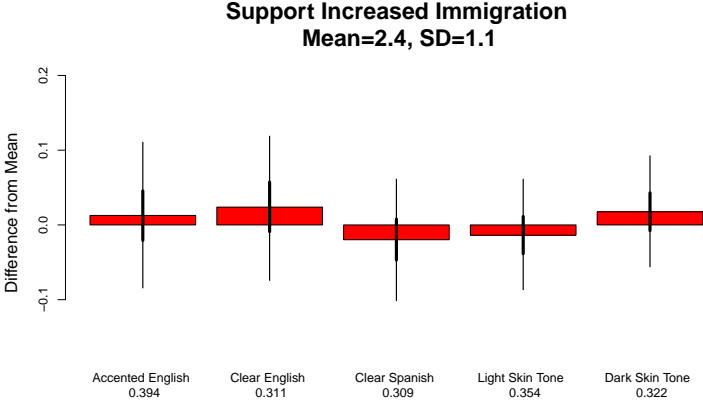


Figure 11: August 2010: Impacts on question about levels of legal immigration

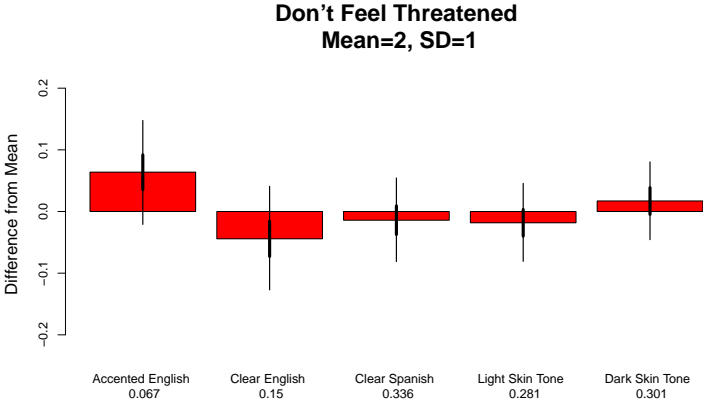


Figure 12: August 2010: Impacts on sense that American way of life is threatened.

Appendix B: Video Script, Experiment 1

Newscaster: Are you ready to make it possible for 12 million illegal immigrants to stay in America, with a few hurdles? A deal on just this is being pounded out on Capitol Hill and under the plan here is how it would go. The illegal immigrants would be required to pay \$5,000 and then have eight years to return to their native country at least once to pass a background check and get legal status. Would this finally calm the raging debate in America or just incite more?

Voice-over 1: One immigrant agreed to speak with us on the condition that we not show his identity.

Voice-over 2 (randomly varied): Since I got here, I've worked hard, always paid my taxes. I'd really like the chance to be an American citizen.

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