

Labeling Asylum-seekers: The Power of Words or the Power of the World over Words?¹

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Abstract

This paper investigates the interaction between the effects of wording and other elements of framing on public attitudes toward asylum policies. In particular, we focus on the labels of asylum-seekers and the discourse about the recent refugee crisis in Europe. In 2015 and 2016, we conducted two survey-experiments in Hungary where mass migration was the major issue on the political agenda at the time of the surveys. The salience of the issue was manipulated in both studies. Earlier findings have indicated that even words with the same meaning could prompt different interpretations in specific contexts. In contrast, we show that even large effects of wording, even if they are driven by differential meaning, can be suppressed by other elements of framing.

Keywords: Asylum-seekers, public attitudes, wording effect, issue-salience, pretreatment effect, survey-experiment, Hungary

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1. Introduction

An unprecedented large number of asylum-seekers crossed the borders of the European Union in 2015 and 2016. Issues related to this new wave of migration have been high on the political agenda in several European countries. Debates have emerged within and between countries over the right asylum-policies.

There is a basic dilemma behind those conflicts. On the one hand, a majority of asylum-seekers have escaped from war zones and/or miserable life conditions; and many of them have risked their life to reach Europe. On the other hand, some say that the integration of a large number of newcomers in a short period of time could be costly. In other words: the issue can be framed either as a *refugee* crisis or an *immigration* issue.

Hungary, whose southern border is partly an external border of the European Union, has also been affected by the crisis (e.g. Simonovits and Bernát 2016, see also the Online Supplement); and asylum policy has suddenly become the most important issue in public discourse for a year and a half here (Figure S1, S2).² Choice of words has been important part of framing since the beginning of the public debate (Bernáth & Messing 2016). Government politicians have regularly referred to asylum-seekers as (illegal) *immigrants* (Figure S3). Some media outlets have followed suit, while other ones have more often referred to asylum-seekers as *refugees* (Table S6, S7).

This paper addresses the power of words hypothesis in this situation. We carried out two online survey-experiments on wording in Hungary: one in the first year of the crisis, and another one seven months later in 2016. The salience of the issue of the refugee crisis was manipulated in both studies. We analyze the influence of labeling asylum-seekers (as *refugees* vs. *immigrants*) on revealed attitudes toward asylum policy.

One might expect to find significant wording effects in our experiments. The terms *refugee* and *immigrant* have different meanings; choice of words is not equivalence framing in this case (Scheufele & Iyengar 2012, Huber & Paris 2013). Earlier evidence also suggests that people are more solidaristic towards *refugees* than *immigrants* (Augoustinos & Quinn 2003). However, studies on the framing of salient issues warn about the pretreatment effect: public discourse can shape and also stabilize opinions that eventually become resistant to laboratory (or real word) framing (Druckman & Leeper 2012). Some recent studies of wording effects also point to similar mechanisms (e.g. Merolla et al. 2013).

The major contribution of our study is the investigation of the moderating role of salience in wording effects when choice of words is *not* equivalence framing. We focus on two words with different meaning. Moreover, we look at attitudes towards asylum policy in a country where immigration hadn't been an issue before the recent refugee crisis (Figure S2). However, our studies were carried out during a period when large scale migration was in the spotlight.

Our data from the first study on a 500 strong population sample shows that there is a strong wording effect in the low salience condition: respondents are more solidaristic towards *refugees* than *immigrants*. However, this large wording effect disappears among those for

² Readers may find Figures S1-S3 and Tables S1-S7 in the Online Supplement.

whom the issue was made salient (this finding is robust to certain variations of the survey design). Moreover, there is no significant wording effect in the second study that was conducted in a later period of the crisis.

Our media analysis reveals that most of our respondents have been exposed to a mixed use of the two labels in news reports (Table S6, S7). This could contribute to the diminishing effect of wording. Indeed, there is weak evidence that suggests that wording effect does not always diminish among those who are exposed only to those media reports that tend avoid one of the two terms when talking about asylum-seekers.

In the next section, we briefly review the findings that are most relevant to our analysis. We present our hypotheses in Section 3, and describe our data and methods afterwards. Results are presented in Section 5. Section 6 concludes.

2. Wording effects

The study of the power of words has had a long tradition in social science research. Here we point to two lines of research. First, studies in survey methodology have been focusing on the effects of question wording in questionnaires. A long series of survey experiments conducted by Howard Schuman, Stanley Presser and their colleagues were among the most notable early studies on questionnaire design effects (Schuman and Presser 1981). A second line of research has been focusing on the role of labeling in stigmatizing and de-stigmatizing certain marginalized groups. An intriguing example is the study of the history of labeling Americans of African descent (Martin 1991, Hall et al. 2015).

When it comes to the empirical testing of the power of words, those two lines of research are often inseparable. Moreover, framing theory could provide a common theoretical ground for both lines of research (Kahneman & Tversky 1984). Those research traditions usually interpret wording effects as equivalence frames. That is, by changing words one does not manipulate what is communicated but how it is communicated (Scheufele & Iyengar 2012). In this case, different words refer to the same object but prompt different associations about the attributes of the object.

It has been a common conclusion of those research traditions that choice of words could influence public attitudes towards social groups and institutions. Several studies have pointed in this direction in recent decades. A widely cited early example is a survey experiment conducted in the US in the 1980s, within the framework of the General Social Survey. In this experiment, Smith (1987) shows that there is much lower public support for *welfare* as opposed to *assistance to the poor*. In recent years, findings by Bryan et al. (2011) attracted considerable attention. They found that minor changes in wording of a pre-election questionnaire could result in significant differences in voter turnout. Theories and empirical findings on the power of words urged emancipatory movements to focus on the stigma certain group-labels carry but others may don't. Repeated efforts to de-stigmatize Americans of African descent by changing the label denoting this group are prime examples of this line of thinking (Hall et al. 2015). The power of words thesis has become even more popular among political strategists in recent decades. A widely cited example of manipulative wording is the

suggestion by the Bush administration's spin doctors to replace the expression *global warming* with *climate change* to manipulate voters' thinking about environmental policies (Schuldt et al. 2015).

However, some recent findings cast doubts on the classical version of the power of words hypothesis. For instance, Gerber et al. (2016) could not replicate Bryan et al.'s (2011) intriguing findings on the effect of very minor manipulations of wording on real world voting behavior. The more robust results of Gerber et al. (2016) indicate that using verbs instead of nouns in a questionnaire about voting could not influence voter turnout. Their study points to the limits of equivalence framing; the type of manipulation when the different words used basically mean the same thing. Moreover, Huber and Paris (2013) reinterpret Smith's (1987) classical findings on the substantially stronger support for the *assistance to the poor* as opposed to *welfare*. They argue that the two expressions mean different things: according to their respondents, *assistance to the poor* includes more poverty alleviating institutions than *welfare*. That is, the choice between the two expressions in a questionnaire is not equivalence framing. Furthermore, Schuldt et al. (2015) point to the limits of the manipulative use of the power of the words thesis. They show that the manipulative use of *climate change* as opposed to *global warming* may have backfired among Republican voters. Namely, referring to *climate change*, as opposed to *global warming* induces higher support for pro-environmental policies among American Republicans.

Schuldt et al. (2015) also highlight another intriguing finding. *Climate change* and *global warming* do mean different things, but Democratic voters react to them similarly in their study. That is, while earlier studies concentrated on how two words with the same meaning could induce different reactions, some new findings not only point to the limits of equivalence framing in the manipulation of wording, but also show that (some groups of) respondents may ignore differences in (original) meaning of words.

Several studies have investigated the effects of wording on attitudes toward asylum-seekers, immigrants and related policies in the past decade. The findings are similar to the results in other policy domains. Augoustinos and Quinn (2003) examine Australian voters' attitudes towards policies related to *asylum seekers*, *refugees* and *illegal immigrants*. They find that wording has a significant effect on responses. What they find, however, is not equivalence framing effect. The above three categories may refer to different kind of people. Knoll et al. (2011) and Merolla et al. (2013), on the other hand, investigate equivalence framing effects. They focus on the impacts of labeling non-legal immigrants. They find no significant differences between American voters' attitudes towards *undocumented* immigrants and *illegal* immigrants. This is intriguing since those adjectives are considered by spin doctors as politically important labels, and their use in public discourse is divided along partisan lines. Merolla et al. (2013) point to an important mechanism that can diminish the influence of politically charged labels. Namely, because of high salience, „individuals may have a concrete image of an undocumented or illegal immigrant...invoking a different term make little difference” (Merolla et al. 2013, p. 800.). We follow this line of research, and investigate the constraints high salience poses on wording effects.

3. Hypotheses

We first test the old hypothesis according to which the wording of questionnaire items influences answers. Our investigation is about a weak version of the old hypothesis, where choice of words cannot be considered to be equivalence framing. That is, the words we examine in the experiments have slightly different meanings.

In the experiments, two terms are used to label asylum seekers: *refugees* on the one hand, and *immigrants* on the other. As we mentioned above, both terms have been used to label those people coming from outside Europe who crossed the borders of the European Union and have asked for asylum in 2015 and 2016 (Table S6 and S7). However, they do not denote exactly the same social groups. The term *refugee* defines a migrant's motivation to move, but is unclear about whether s/he intends to settle in the target country. The term *immigrant*, on the other hand, defines a migrant's intention to settle in the target country, but is unclear about her/his motivation to leave her/his home country. *Refugees* cannot be blamed for leaving their home country and asking for help. In this way, they can be regarded as people deserving public assistance. In contrast, one does not have information about an *immigrant's* deservingness by default. At the same time, however, the perceived costs of immigration are made salient by using this latter term.

Based on the above argument, we hypothesize that if asylum-seekers are labeled as *refugees* (as opposed to *immigrants*) in questionnaire items, respondents are more likely to support their accession and the provision of long term shelter for them. This is our first hypothesis (H1) to test in this paper.

However, our survey-experiments were carried out during a period when the issue of migration was very high on the political agenda in Hungary (Figure S2). Some recent studies on framing have emphasized the moderating effect of social context on the results of experimental manipulations. Namely, treatment effects on opinions about a salient issue can be diminished in the laboratory as a result of public discourse that had shaped respondents' opinions before they entered the laboratory. This is the so called pretreatment effect (Druckman & Leeper 2012).

Among studies of wording effects (labeling immigrants, in particular), Merolla et al. (2013) have recently highlighted similar mechanisms. They argue that due to high salience of the issue, a concrete image of a typical immigrant has been developed in voters' minds, and the different labels attached to this group do not alter this image (and the attitudes based on this image).

We test the hypothesis based on this more recent approach and contrast it with the classical „power of words” approach. Namely, we assume that public discourse on asylum-seekers prior to a survey-experiment can diminish the effect of wording of questionnaire items on asylum policy. This is the second hypothesis (H2) to test in our survey.

We operationalize H2 in two ways in the surveys. First, we suppose that the influence of public discourse on images associated with specific words is a gradual process. Consequently, one may detect weaker effect of wording in a later period of the public debate than in an earlier one. Second, we suppose that making elements of public discourse salient for respondents, decreases wording effect at any point in time during the public debate.

We investigated the effects of choice of words in two studies during a period in which the refugee crisis was high on the political agenda (December 2015, and June 2016, see Figure S2). We compare the findings of those studies in this paper. Moreover, we investigated the effects of news framing in both of the studies: some subjects answered the questions about asylum policy after reading a short news report on the issue³ Hence, we can control for salience, and compare wording effects on responses in low salience and high salience conditions in both studies.

One may see H2 as incomplete. It implicitly supposes that voters are exposed to a mixed use of different labels of asylum seekers. However, many politicians and journalists believe in the power of words; therefore they often use such labels selectively (Merolla et al. 2013, Schuldt et al. 2015). As a result, some media users could be exposed to news reports that prefer to avoid certain labels.

We suppose that the predominant use of the term *immigrant* tends to be associated with negative frames (i.e. frames emphasizing the problems arising due to accepting asylum-seekers). The predominant use of the term *refugee*, on the other hand, tends to be associated with positive frames (i.e. frames emphasizing the problems asylum seekers escape from and face during their journey). That is, selective exposure to one of the two terms is associated with selective exposure to positive or negative media frames. In this way, selective choice of words tends to strengthen solidarity towards *refugees* or weaken solidarity towards *immigrants*. As a consequence, the difference between the attitudes towards *refugees* and *immigrants* is expected to remain larger among those who are exposed to a selective use of the labels of asylum seekers in news reports than among those who are exposed to a mixed use of the two labels.

Our media analysis shows that while many news reports have used both terms, leading Hungarian politicians and some media outlets have tended to avoid one of the two labels (Figure S3, Table S6 and S7). Media research and anecdotal evidence also shows that selective use of labels of asylum seekers in recent public debates in Hungary is associated with the use of specific frames (Bernáth & Messing 2016).

We conclude from the above argument that the moderating influence of public discourse on wording effect is itself weaker among those who are exposed to selective use of labels of asylum seekers in news reports. This is the third hypothesis (H3) of our analysis. We test H3 by investigating the interaction between wording effect and selective media use. As a corollary of H2, we expect that this interaction effect is more likely to occur in the latter phase of the public debate and/or when the issue is made salient (by presenting a news report before asking respondents about asylum policy).

In the next section we provide more information on our data and analytical strategy.

³ Findings on framing effects in these surveys are presented elsewhere (XXXX).

4. Data and methods

Surveys

We conducted two online survey-experiments on media effects in 2015 and 2016. The first survey was conducted by a professional polling firm ([Kutatocentrum](#)) in the first half of December 2015 on a national quota sample of 500 Hungarian adult internet users aged 18-65. We complemented this sample with a student sample of 233 respondents, and a convenience sample of 153 respondents recruited on Facebook (we conducted all the three surveys simultaneously). The student survey was carried out among engineering and economics students in Budapest and the South-Western town of Pécs. Respondents filled in self-administered questionnaires in classroom settings. The Facebook survey is based on convenience snowball sampling. When it comes to the first survey, we present the findings based on the online population sample, but refer to the data of the student sample and the Facebook sample as a robustness check (the full data-base is downloadable, see the Online Supplement).

The second survey (organized by the same polling firm) was completed in a two-week period in June and July 2016 on an online quota sample of 1000 adult internet users. We changed the design and the questionnaire: The size of the group in the low salience condition (control group of the media framing experiment) was substantially increased and additional policy questions about asylum-seekers were added to the questionnaire.

Our surveys avoided periods just after the cornerstone events and intensive political campaigns (see the Online Supplement for a summary of the major events). This helped us to manipulate the salience of an already fairly salient issue in our questionnaires.

Target variables and treatments

In both of the two studies, there was an item about the right policy to deal with legal asylum-seekers crossing the Hungarian borders. We asked the following question: „What should the government do with *refugees* applying for asylum who came from a war zone and arrived legally” (emphasis added). However, a random half of the sample was asked about *immigrants* applying for asylum – instead of *refugees*. Respondents had to choose one of six options of suggestions about what the government should do with legal asylum-seekers. Response options range from immediate expulsion to helping them to settle in Hungary („finding a new home country in Hungary”). In the statistical analyses, three response categories of the dependent variable are distinguished: 1) expel them after a few days at most, 2) give them shelter for a few months at most, and 3) grant them asylum. For the sake of easier interpretation of (linear) regression coefficients, we coded the three response categories with 0, .5 and 1, respectively.

In the second study, two other questions were added to the questionnaire. Those questions reflect new events and changing trends related to the refugee crisis since the previous study. Moreover, they help to check the robustness of findings on wording effects. The first of those question asks „Do you agree that the European Union should accept *refugees/immigrants* arriving at its borders?” The second one asks „Do you agree that Hungary should accept *refugees/immigrants* coming from war zones and being granted

asylum in the European Union, as an act of solidarity within the Union?” The same term was used in all of the questions within each questionnaire. Similarly to the original policy question, three response categories of those new questions are distinguished in the statistical analyses.

The wording experiment was complemented by an experiment in media framing effects in both studies.⁴ Respondents in the treatment groups read a short news report about the refugee crisis before answering the question(s) about asylum policy. There are two types of articles: the first version concentrates on the refugees’ needs and motivations, while the second one stresses the burden they may pose on European countries. The labels of asylum-seekers in news reports were adjusted to the wording of the policy question (either *refugees* or *immigrants*). In the first survey, the vignettes were based on news articles published in the largest Hungarian news portal (Index.hu) in Autumn 2015. In the second survey, we created fictitious reports that were based on news about a new wave of arrivals in the early Summer of 2016.⁵ Visual cues were also manipulated in the first survey. The treatment groups of the media framing experiments compose the high salience condition in our wording experiments. The control groups serve as the low salience condition.

For testing H3, we needed data on media use. There is a section addressing this issue in our questionnaires (Table S7 S7). Based on our analysis of wording of news reports on the refugee crisis and the survey data on media use, we created dummy variables (possibly) indicating exposure to selective labeling of asylum-seekers. In both of our surveys, around one sixth of the respondents were denoted as people exposed to predominant use of the term *immigrant* (as opposed to *refugee*) in news reports. About the same proportion of respondents are exposed to the predominant use of *refugee* (as opposed to *immigrant*) in our surveys.

Analytical strategy

There is still no consensus about the use of multiple regression models to control for socio-demographic variables in experiments (Freedman 2008, Lin 2013). The major justification for simple two-way comparisons is a proper randomization process in experiments. However, it was hard to exclude or control for treatment-dependent non-response bias in our online surveys. This is the main reason to use multivariate regression models for testing our hypotheses. Nonetheless, this choice does not change our qualitative findings. In addition, we also present two-way tables and regression estimates without control variables.

Originally, ordered probit models were adopted to test the hypotheses. Ordered logit models and OLS regression estimates were also estimated as robustness checks. There are no qualitative differences between the conclusions of the three types of models. We decided to present the OLS regression estimates in the main text. We did it because the outcomes of OLS models are easier to understand and interpret than those of the probit models (especially when it comes to the interpretation of interaction effects and the comparisons of parameter estimates of different variables and models).

⁴ See XXXX for the analysis of the media effect experiment.

⁵ See the English transcripts of the vignettes in the Online Supplement.

5. Results

Study 1

The first hypothesis states that respondents' revealed attitudes about asylum policy depend on the wording of the question. Namely, people are more ready to accept asylum seekers if they are labeled as *refugees* as opposed to *immigrants*. H1 assumes that this effect could be found independently of the questionnaire- and social context. Indeed, in our online population sample, there is a modest but significant difference between the answers of those who read a question about refugees and those who read one about immigrants. A third of the respondents support long term asylum for *refugees*, but only 23% percent support it for *immigrants*. The multivariate regression analysis also reinforces H1. Nonetheless, the effect of wording is relatively small.⁶ Moreover, this finding about H1 is not robust to changes in the survey design: there is no such main effect of wording in the student sample and the small Facebook sample (the parameter estimates of the regression models are small or even close to zero).

The second hypothesis is about a kind of pretreatment effect. It states that the effect of wording can be weakened significantly by the influence of public discourse. In the first Study, we could test H2 by comparing the wording effect in the low salience condition to the one in high salience condition where the the public debate on refugee crisis was made salient by presenting a news article to the respondents.

The wording effect in the low salience condition is much larger than in the full sample: every second respondent supports long term shelter for *refugees* but only 27% of them do for *immigrants* (the difference is significant, $p < .01$). The respective shares of supportters are 29% and 23% in the high salience condition. Multivariate regression estimates also support H2; the interaction effect $\text{wording} \times \text{salient}$ is significant ($p < .01$). According to the point estimates in the linear regression model, a large wording effect in the low salience condition is mostly but not fully suppressed in the high salience condition.

This was a multi-scope study, also focusing on nuances of media framing, so the sub-sample size in the low salience condition is fairly small (valid $n=76$). Hence, the estimates based on this sub-sample have low statistical power. However, the findings on H2 are robust to the sample design. In the group in the low salience condition of the student sample, 71% support long term shelter for *refugees* but only 31% for *immigrants* ($p=.09$); while in the high salience condition, 38% and 41% support this option, respectively. Regression analyses lead to the same conclusion. The size of the wording effect in the low salience condition of the student sample is similar to the one estimated in the respective group of the population sample; and (according to the point estimates) this effect is completely suppressed in the high salience condition. Estimates based on the Facebook sample point in the same direction (nonetheless, the point estimates of the multivariate regression model are somewhat smaller and non-significant). Here, around two thirds of respondents suggest to giving long term shelter for *refugees* but only one quarter of them for *immigrants* in the low salience condition. This difference based on wording completely disappears in the high salience condition. To sum up, our data supports the hypothesis about a pretreatment effect that suppresses wording effect.

⁶ See Table S1 for a comparison of effect sizes of different variables

H3 states that the moderating role of salience (as assumed by H2) is itself moderated by selective media use. Namely, the wording effect could remain strong among those who are *not* exposed to a mixed use of those words that label asylum-seekers. For the sake of clarity, we do not analyze multiple interaction effects in the regression models. Instead, we focus our attention on the high salience condition (where wording effect was found to be suppressed), and investigate the interaction between wording effect and specific media use within this subsample. We expect that wording effect exists among those who follow the news reports only of those media outlets that strongly prefer the term *refugee* (*immigrant*) over the other one.

The data of the first study does not support H3. Point estimates of the interaction terms are around zero (and statistically insignificant). Robustness checks are rather inconclusive. In the student sample, there is a large wording effect in the predicted direction among those who are exposed to the predominant use of the term *refugee* in news media. However, the wording parameter has the opposite sign among those who are exposed to the predominant use of the term *immigrant*. The results in the small Facebook sample do not support H3 either.

Study 2

At the time of our second study, the refugee crisis had been in the spotlight for around 18 months in Hungarian news media. We supposed that this could be a long enough time for the public discourse to suppress wording effects that are based on associations that had been attached to those two terms (*refugee* and *immigrant*) before the issue was high on the political agenda.

Indeed, H1 can be definitely rejected in this study. 31% of respondents support long term shelter for asylum-seekers in both wording conditions. The regression coefficient of wording effect is almost zero. This finding, in itself, supports H2, and shows that wording effect is not context-free (in this case). Direct tests of H2 reinforce this conclusion. Regression estimates based on the pooled sample of the control groups (low salience condition) in the two studies show that the large wording effect found in the low salience condition of the first study completely disappears in the low salience condition of the second study (Table S5).⁷

In the first study, we tested H2 about pretreatment effect by comparing wording effects in the low and high salience conditions. However, based on the findings of null-effects, one cannot expect to find differences in wording effects between the two conditions in the second study. Indeed, there is no such difference here. This does not falsify H2, however we do not have data to test it.

H3 assumes that the suppression of wording effect (as assumed by H2) is moderated by selective exposure to specific terms used to label asylum-seekers in news reports. Since wording effect is also suppressed in the low salience condition in this study, we investigate the moderating role of selective media use in both conditions.

As one can see in Table 3a, there are small, non significant effects in the low salience condition (and the point estimates are not always in the predicted direction). However, in the

⁷ There was no student survey at the time of our online survey. But we added the question on asylum policy to a small scale student survey in March 2017. There was no any difference between responses in the two wording conditions (N=98, salience wasn't manipulated).

high salience condition (Table 3b), the estimates of the interaction effects *wording#media use* are in the predicted direction. Wording effect is not particularly small, and statistically significant ($p=.04$) among those who are likely to be exposed to the predominant use of the term *immigrant* in news reports, but not significant ($p=.31$) among those who are exposed to the predominant use of *refugee* as a label for asylum-seekers. This may lend some support to H3. Nonetheless, it is far from being solid evidence in favor of it.

In June 2016, we could not conduct a student and a Facebook survey, however we carried out another type of robustness check. There are two other policy questions related to the refugee crisis in the questionnaire of the second study. One of them addresses the refugee quota proposed by the EU Commission earlier that year, and asks respondents about how should Hungary react to the proposal. The other question is about the EU-level asylum-policy (see Section 4).

Similarly to the test with the original question, there is no wording effect on the answers to the question about the Hungarian government's reaction to the refugee quota. 32% of respondents suggest accepting the EU proposal about the EU-wide distribution of asylum-seekers, irrespective of the wording of the question. Multivariate regression estimates also suggest zero wording-effect. Thus, H1 cannot be reinforced by our results. Moreover, there is no evidence in favor of H2, since wording effect is around zero both in the low and high salience conditions. Finally the evidence doesn't support H3, since there is no statistically significant interaction effect of wording and media use (point estimates are in the predicted direction in the high salience condition, but the coefficients are not statistically significant).

Analysis of the opinions on the optimal asylum-policy of the EU, however, yields different results. First, there is a small wording effect in the full sample. 43% of the respondents suggest that the EU should accept *refugees*, but only 35% support accepting *immigrants*. Accordingly, there is a small (and weakly significant) wording effect in the multivariate regression models. The estimate of the interaction effect of *wording#salience condition* is in the predicted direction but is small and not statistically significant. As far as H3 is concerned, wording effect is substantially and statistically significantly ($p=.04$) larger among those who are exposed to the predominant use of the term *immigrant* in news reports than among those who are exposed to a mixed use of the two terms (within the high salience condition).

Summary

In sum, based on our findings in the two studies, the „power of words” hypothesis about a universal effect of certain manipulations of wording on attitudes (H1) is clearly rejected. Wording effect is highly variable in our surveys. What is more, our results strongly support the contrasting hypothesis which claims that even strong and meaningful wording effects can be suppressed by other element of framing (H2). Finally, we found weak evidence that supports the hypothesis about the connection between the variance in choices of words in news reports and the strength of wording effect among different groups of media consumers (H3).

6. Conclusions

The study on wording effects has had a long tradition in social science research. Some of the most important studies in this line of research have shown that slight changes in wording of questions can result in significant changes in the distribution of answers. These results have attracted considerable attention within and outside the scientific community. However, some recent findings have also pointed to the limits of wording effects. Such negative results are most likely when the manipulation of wording can be interpreted as equivalence framing.

This paper presents a systematic investigation into a certain type of constraints on wording effects. Namely, we focus on the role of elite discourse in suppressing potential influence of wording of policy questions on public attitudes. In particular, we are interested in the effects of labeling certain social groups on the degree of solidarity towards them. Our research has exploited a special situation in Hungary in the past two years: Without any precedent, asylum policy and the issue of immigration had suddenly become the central issue of public discourse in this country. Several terms have been used to label asylum seekers when discussing events and perspectives related to the crisis. Those terms differ not only in the associations attached to them, but also in their basic meanings. One may suppose that choice of words has often been a deliberate decision based on the „power of words” hypothesis.

We hypothesized that the basic meanings of the terms used in public debates to label asylum-seekers have been fading as people listening to the news reports and public debates have created their own images of the typical asylum-seeker – irrespective of the terms used to label them (c.f. Merolla et al. 2013). Any term used in news reports can activate associations of this image. This hypothesis is in contrast with the „power of words” thesis that has motivated many past researchers and has also gained popularity outside the academia, including media professionals and political actors. We also assumed that the blurring of differences between everyday meanings of various terms is moderated by media use. Namely, deliberative selection of labels in news reports can maintain significant differences in associations attached to the various terms in certain segments of the audience (c.f. Schuldt et al. 2015) – preserving, somehow, the „power of words” hypothesis.

The unconditional version of the „power of words” thesis has been rejected in our investigation of the findings of two survey experiments. Instead, there is strong evidence that suggests that issue salience can diminish wording effects stemming from differences in original meanings and associations. In the earlier period of the public debate, wording strongly influenced policy attitudes, but this effect disappeared as we made the public discourse on the issue salient for respondents. This finding is robust to certain variations in survey design. Moreover, by the time of the second study, when the refugee crisis had been high on the political agenda for already 18 months, wording effect had disappeared even in the control (non-salience) group.

There is only weak evidence to support the hypothesis about the moderating role of media use in the influence of public discourse on wording effect. It could be a measurement problem: our media-analysis and anecdotal evidence suggest that probably only a few people had really been exposed to a very selective use of labels of asylum seekers, and it is not easy to delineate this group with few questions about media use. On the other hand, however,

recent findings from the US show that fairly large groups can easily be distinguished (without direct reference to media use) based on their distinctive interpretation of certain, politically charged words (see Schuldt et al. 2015 on *climate change* vs. *global warming* among Democrats and Republicans). Refined versions of this hypothesis could be tested in the future. Maybe, the degree of salience could matter: the likelihood of selective exposure to certain terms may decrease as an issue is becoming omnipresent in the media, politics and peer-to-peer communication. Other characteristics of the public debate may also matter.

Finally, one should note that robustness checks in the second study point to the potential role of thematic context in moderating wording effects. A weak wording effect reappears in the second study as we shift the focus of our policy question from Hungary to the European Union. Systematic studies into the role of thematic context in shaping the interaction between wording and public discourse, therefore, are warranted.

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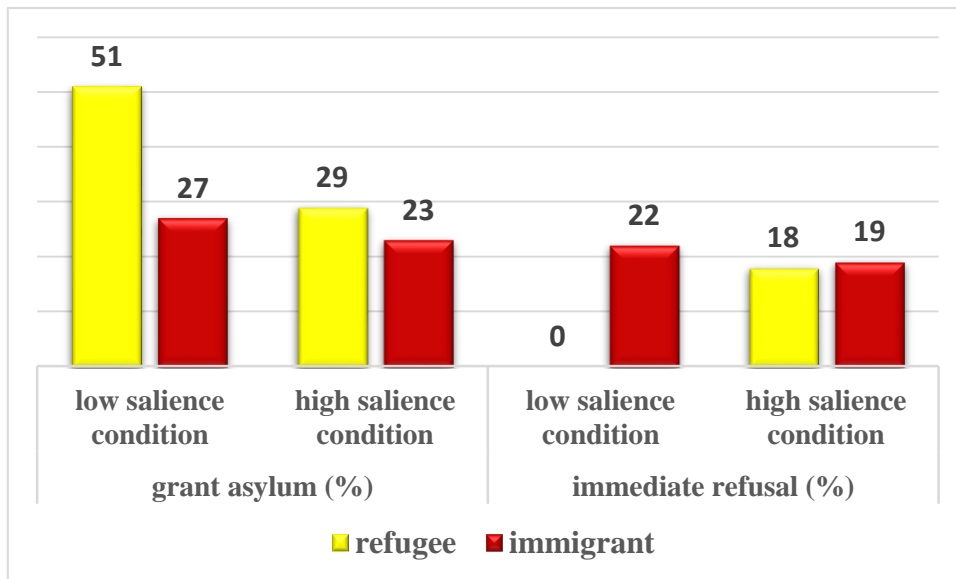


Figure 1. Attitudes towards asylum policy in Study 1.

Distribution of answers under different wording and salience conditions. Question: What should the government do with *refugees/immigrants* applying for asylum who came from a war zone and arrived legally? Response categories distinguished: asylum; short term shelter, immediate refusal. N=465 (76, and 389 for low salience and high salience conditions, respectively). See Table 1 for hypothesis testing.

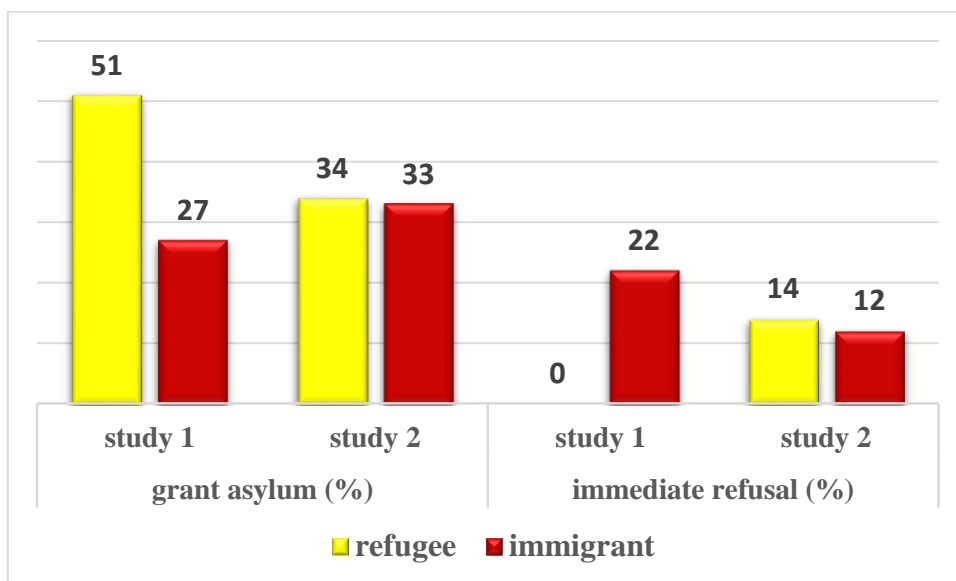


Figure 2. Attitudes towards asylum policy in the low salience condition in Study 1 and Study 2.

Distribution of answers depending on question wording. Question: What should the government do with *refugees/immigrants* applying for asylum who came from a war zone and arrived legally? Response categories distinguished: asylum; short term shelter, immediate refusal. N₁=76, N₂=4XX. For hypothesis testing, see Table S. in the Online Supplement.

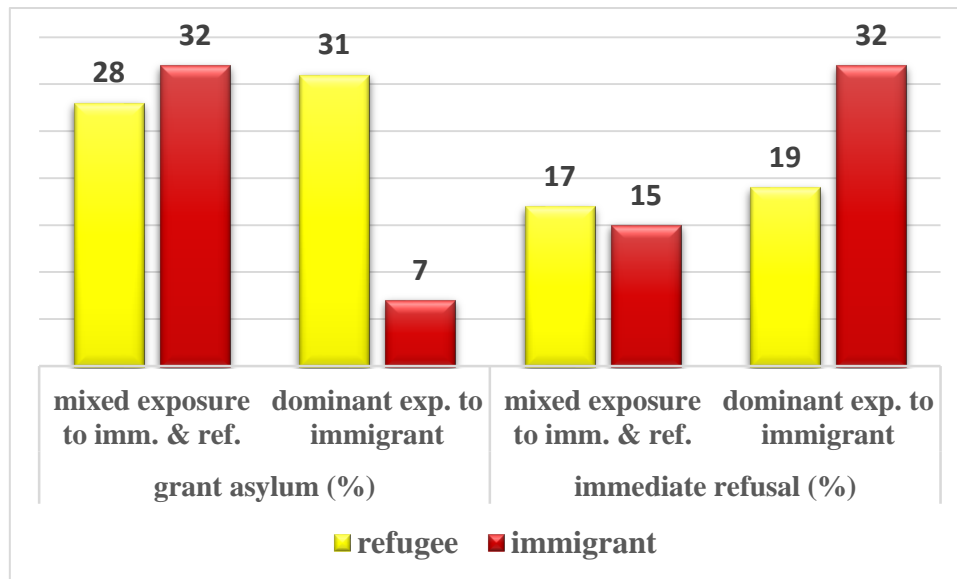


Figure 3. Attitudes towards asylum policy in Study 2: Comparing those exposed to a mixed use of labels to those exposed to predominant use of the term *immigrant* in media reports. Distribution of answers by question wording and media use. Question: What should the government do with *refugees/immigrants* applying for asylum who came from a war zone and arrived legally? Response categories distinguished: asylum; short term shelter, immediate refusal. N=938 (XXX, and XX for the two types of media consumers, respectively). For hypothesis testing, see Table S. in the Online Supplement.

Table 1. Effects of question wording and issue salience on attitudes towards asylum policy in Study 1 (OLS regression estimates).

VARIABLES	OLS base model	p value	95% confidence intervals		OLS full model	p value	95% confidence intervals	
(Reference: wording refugee & low salience condition)								
Wording: immigrant (low salience)	-.23	.00	-.38	-.08	-.27	.00	-.42	-.13
High salience condition (w: refugee)	-.20	.00	-.31	-.09	-.20	.00	-.31	-.09
Interaction: Immigrant # H. salience	.19	.02	.03	.35	.23	.00	.08	.39
Observations	465				465			
R-squared	.04				.22			
Controls	NO				YES			

Dependent: What should the government do with *refugees/immigrants* applying for asylum who came from a war zone and arrived legally? Response categories distinguished: asylum (coded 1); short term shelter (coded .5), immediate refusal (coded 0). For estimations of main effects, coefficients of control variables and average marginal effects in logit and probit models see Table S1 in the Online Supplement.