I Say Tomato, You Say Domate: Differential Reactions to English-only Workplace Policies by Persons from Immigrant and Non-immigrant Families

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ABSTRACT. Immigrants now compose approximately 12% of the population of the United States and a sizable proportion of the workforce. Yet in contrast to research on other traditionally under-represented groups (e.g., women, African Americans), there are relatively few studies on issues related to being an immigrant in the U.S. workforce. This study examined English-only workplace policies, focusing on reactions to business justifications – explanations that justify managerial decisions as business necessities – for these policies. We contrasted the reactions of individuals coming from immigrant families, where at least one parent was an immigrant to the U.S., with those of persons from non-immigrant families. Results of an experiment indicated that business justifications were successful in influencing the attitudes of non-immigrants toward the English-only policies, but did not influence the attitudes of individuals from immigrant families. Probing the reasons for this effect, a thought-listing protocol suggested that non-immigrants mentioned more of the business benefits of the English-only policy than did individuals from immigrant families. Further, business justifications for the English-only policy led individuals from immigrant families, but not those from non-immigrant families, to view the organization as being less ethical and less concerned with the welfare of its workers. The implications of messages from management being understood differently by different demographic groups are discussed.

KEY WORDS: disclaimers, English-only workplace policies, immigrants, social accounts

Introduction

Today, more than 32 million immigrants live in the United States of America – about 12% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, June 2003). For more than 95% of immigrants, English is a second language. Among people ages 5 to 17 – the U.S. workforce of tomorrow – English as a second language is even more common, as approximately 18% speak a language other than English at home. As the numbers of non-native English speakers in the workplace are increasing, “English-only” workplace policies, which require employees to speak English on the job, have become more common. These
policies have caused emotional debates between advocates, who claim they are necessary for the efficient functioning of the organization, and adversaries, who argue that the policies violate workers’ rights.

Despite the controversies about English-only workplace policies, researchers have yet to attend to their effects on employees. The purpose of our study is to examine reactions to business justifications (explanations which justify managerial decisions as business necessities; Brief et al., 2000) for these policies. In particular, we will focus on the potentially different reactions of individuals more or less affected by the policies: people from immigrant vs. non-immigrant families. In the remainder of this introduction, we will first provide background information on English-only workplace policies and business justifications. Next, we will argue that individuals from immigrant and non-immigrant families react differently to business justifications, such that those from immigrant families are less influenced by the positive effects of these justifications for endorsing the policies. We then will examine two mechanisms (selective perception and perspective-taking) that might underlie these differential reactions. Finally, we will hypothesize that, in response to business justifications, individuals from immigrant and non-immigrant families also differ such that these justifications lead to more negative perceptions of an organization’s concern for employees and its ethicality among individuals from immigrant families.

In addition to being one of the first studies of English-only workplace policies, our study addresses an important gap in the research on justifications such as disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975) and social accounts (Scott and Lyman, 1968). The main finding of this research is that justifications for managerial decisions are an effective tool in mitigating negative employee reactions (e.g., Bies, 1987; Greenberg, 1990). Heeding Sitkin and Bies’ (1993) call for research on boundary conditions for the effectiveness of social accounts, we examine message recipients’ membership in a social group (i.e., immigrant status in our study) as a moderator of the effects of social accounts. Furthermore, our research aims to uncover mechanisms that might underlie reactions to social accounts, hence allowing for the creation of process knowledge.

Pragmatically, our research is important because it sensitizes managers that their justifications may cause different reactions among different audiences, questioning the common managerial belief about the uniformly positive effects of explaining one’s actions. Our study can inform managers about those recipients for whom business justifications for English-only workplace policies may be effective and those recipients for whom they may not be.

English-only workplace policies

In April 2001, the University of the Incarnate Word, a private university in San Antonio, Texas, settled an English-only workplace suit, paying $2.44 million (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2003a). The university’s director of housekeeping had forced Latino housekeepers to speak only English in the workplace at all times, even at lunch and during breaks. Employees who could not comply with the policy were harassed. In September 2000, St. Louis-based Watlow Electric Manufacturing Company settled a suit after it had required Latino workers to speak only English on their assembly line jobs. One worker had been fired for greeting a Spanish-speaking colleague with “buenos dias” (Anonymous, 2000).

The cases above are two examples out of many, as the EEOC has classified cases involving English-only policies as litigation priorities, resulting in 348 charges of discrimination because of English-only workplace rules in 2002, an increase of 370% over 2001 (EEOC, 2003b). According to its “Guidelines on Discrimination Because of National Origin” (EEOC, 2003c), the EEOC presumes that any rule to speak English “at all times” at work violates federal laws and “will closely scrutinize it.” To be permissible by EEOC standards, an English-only workplace policy can require employees to speak English “only at certain times” and must be justified by “business necessities” (legitimate concerns for safe and efficient business operations that could not be assured otherwise). Employers, hence, have the onus of providing justifications for English-only workplace policies. These justifications have included improved communication among employees or between employees and customers, leading to increased operational efficiency, occupational safety, higher sales