



Reframing the debate: Rewriting the language structure of social issues

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BEFORE WE BEGIN, George Lakoff would like you to take a moment to *not* think about an elephant—whatever you do, please *don't* think about the elephant.

Having trouble? Lakoff would not be surprised. He is a cognitive scientist working to understand how the brain processes language and structures thought. Lakoff and others like him are beginning to spell-out the relationship between language and thought, not only in terms of understanding our neural activity but also in terms of the implications for how we interpret and act on every-day matters—things like politics, economics, and social justice.

Years ago, sociologist Erving Goffmann popularized the idea that language and the brain interact to make *frames*—lenses that we use to understand and engage with the world. Fast-forward to Lakoff and his colleagues and we've entered the world of *issue framing*, where the way we think about issues is consciously manipulated by exploiting the way we think.

This has broad implications for the use of language in politics and the discussion of social issues. The key is to understand how issues are framed, and how to shift that frame for yourself.

Issue framing

Issue framing is about how issues are presented

for discussion and debate. Frames are part of the cognitive architecture that forms the basis of the way we think. As the painterly metaphor implies, the idea of framing describes the way a given issue is perceived and mediated through the confines of a conceptual window. We don't ever see the totality of a subject, or comprehend an issue from all angles. Instead we adopt a 'point of view' on a subject—often quite unconsciously. The concept of framing is obviously not new, in fact we frame issues all the time whether are conscious of it or not.

Further, decades of social psychological research have shown that the human brain is very good at selectively filtering the world around us in a way that fits our existing mindset. We find it easier to agree with an idea that fits with other ideas we might have. In other words, our world-view is a self-reinforcing entity. It's not unchangeable—in fact, it changes continuously—but it's definitely a challenge for people to be receptive to facts and ideas that counter their established perceptions.

Framing politics

You might be wondering how we are to make the leap from elephants and cognitive theory to social issues. The leap—even for our pachyderm—is actually an easy one. The people work-

ing to shape political perceptions are keenly aware of framing and how it works—and, much like advertisers trying to use lifestyle associations to sell a product—are attempting to exploit it at every turn. The crafty ones do this quite subtly, the less skilled in a more transparent fashion.

This is where things get interesting, for the various sides of any debate are trying to ensure that they have the dominant frame. We are now in an era of “framing wars” to use the military metaphor adopted by the author of a recent *New York Times* article. And this means that the framing of issues will often be competitive and highly polarized. Experts on the subject know that if you control the frame you control the debate.

Lakoff tends to structure his own arguments on political framing in terms of “progressive” versus “conservative” values (a re-statement of the left-wing versus right-wing dichotomy). At any rate, under his framing of the debate, we can see that the dynamics of issue framing are a great challenge for progressive politics at the moment. The “right” in his view has done a superlative job of defining the language and structuring of the political landscape over the last few years, not because their policies and programs are better for people, but because their framing resonates more strongly with voters.

In contrast, rather than advancing their own alternative frames with which to define issues, the social justice community has often limited themselves to trying to rebut the frames advanced by neo-liberalism—in effect asking people not to think about elephants.

Given the success of the conservative agenda over the last few decades, Lakoff and others like him are starting to look closely at this issue. There is growing consensus that, compared to their tax-cutting, social-service eliminating counterparts, progressive organizations and political parties in Canada have not addressed this important communications concept systematically enough—and are weaker for it.

For organizations and individuals concerned with the social well-being of British Columbians,

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there is much to be gleaned from looking at the dynamics of issue-framing. Much the importance of this arises from the recognition that the right has been successful in dominating the political debate not because their ideas are more worthy, but because they have been eminently successful in framing political debates from their perspective. Effectively challenging their dominant ideas is virtually impossible when they have defined (and thus control) the landscape of that debate.

The Process of Framing

To illustrate, let’s take an example from the language of taxation, specifically the idea of “tax relief” and the concept of a “tax burden.” Years ago, American author Oliver Wendell Holmes

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noted, “Taxes are the price we pay for civilization.” Holmes was commenting on the many great benefits that are derived from a collective pooling of resources—hospitals, roadways, education, safety, public peace, and so on. Despite the fact that taxation, as the fundamental fuel for the engine of governance, allows us to address many of our social needs, the language of the conservative parties has constructed taxes as a substantial problem. Canadian politicians have adopted this language wholesale. The language of “tax relief” and other related terms have been bandied about with much regularity—with the net effect of subsuming Holmes’ viewpoint to the extent that the state is seen as a thief—a scoundrel trying to empty the pockets of hard working men and women.

Repeated over and over, the idea of a “tax burden” creates a frame for the practice of taxation. Taxes framed thus imply a form of weighty affliction, a loadstone that threatens to break us, and something from which we need relief. This in turn, paints anyone who can promise to cut taxes

in a positive light.

Further, in this frame it is difficult to argue against “tax relief.” The language used to construct the frame leaves critics and dissenters at a disadvantage. How can relief from something be a bad idea? Even arguing against relief implies an acceptance of the idea of burden. As a consequence, those who deny relief are easily cast as uncaring.

If the issue is reframed, for example, as “paying our dues for living in a civilized society” the debate shifts to connect with what we know are most people’s values—that is, their support for democratic government and strong social programs.

The same dynamic of framing replays itself across a range of issues, from health care, to poverty, security, education, and the environment. For example, in the 1990’s, the Conservative government in Ontario framed a massive land-use strategy under the green-friendly title of “Lands for Life,” even though the strategy would open an unprecedented amount

ELEPHANT HUNTING

Let’s revisit our elephant—the one you weren’t supposed to think about—and see how it illustrates some of the central maxims of framing theory.

Negating the frame evokes the frame. By now it should be obvious that it is impossible not to think of the elephant when told not to, that is, “in order to purposefully not think of an elephant, you have to think of an elephant.” Talk about how bad tax cuts are, and you just reinforce the idea of tax cuts.

Every word evokes a frame. If frames represent the conceptual structure that guides our thinking, then words are the means to trigger these structures in our mind. As Lakoff says: “the word *elephant* evokes a frame with an image of an elephant and certain knowledge” that we might have about elephants (like size, characteristics, behaviors, etc.)

Words defined within a frame evoke the frame—meaning that words that are connected with a given frame will, when used, bring that frame to mind. Again, Lakoff’s example: “Sam picked up the peanut with his trunk.” The word “trunk” is a link. We don’t need to directly index the elephant frame with our language in order for its existence to be connoted by association. Here, the idea of associations is very important. Much of our language works on metaphorical and associative forms of thought—which means that much of the way we view the world does as well. The trunk is part of an elephant, and in the above sentence, the trunk “part” elicits a sense of the whole. The power of suggestion inherent in this is key to understanding how frame theory comes to play in defining social issues.

Evoking a frame reinforces that frame. Whether through association, negation, or direct referencing, any time a frame is raised, it’s conceptual status in the brain is reinforced. It becomes more ‘real’ to us.

of the province's Crown Land to large-scale industrial extraction processes. The government's quick move to frame the debate meant that anyone taking issue with the initiative was taking issue with the conservative frame—which was pitched as being pro-environment, about “life,” “wilderness protection,” the province’s “legacy,” and a range of other devices.

Reframing

The solution is not to engage with an existing frame but to reframe an issue all together. Much of the work of Lakoff and others has been geared towards exploring how issues are framed, and the effect of conservative frames on the erosion of collective, nurturing values and support systems. Reframing issues so that they reflect the values of social and environmental justice is a necessary step toward reclaiming the political space that has been lost.

Table 1: A brief primer on reframing poverty: Changing the Poverty Frame²

Frame From	Frame To
Poverty	Economics
Individuals	Places, conditions, systems
Fixing people	Fixing things so people can benefit
Punishing laziness	Rewarding/incentivizing work
Getting people to work	Getting work to pay people
Making people equal	Making opportunities equal

To reframe an issue, start by identifying the relevant core values that underscore the issue for you (e.g. the need for equitable work, opportunities for social advancement, etc.). In so doing, you will start by developing the moral component of your framework. This is very important: the moral fabric of the frame adds strength and tends to resonate far more than solely fact-based arguments or appeals to intellect. The narrative

support for your frame will become bolder, the story you present richer.

Once you have the moral architecture of your frame worked out, work to articulate your position within this framework. Identify the key facts, arguments, and consequences that are attached to the frame—remember, this is about your frame, not theirs. Finally, work to define a sense of “us and them” from within the perspective of your frame. This is your territory. From within your frame, contrasting ideas should seem as nonsensical as arguments against “tax relief” or “lands for life.” ■

Further Reading

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Frameworks Institute. “Child Poverty” in *Kids Count E-Zine*. <www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue5poverty.shtml>

1 George Lakoff. “Simple Framing.” <www.rockridgeinstitute.org>.

2 Adopted from the Frameworks Institute. “Child Poverty” in *Kids Count E-Zine*. <www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue5poverty.shtml>