The Art of Political Framing

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How Politicians Convince Us That They Are Right

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Contents

Part One

Language and Framing

1.   Language matters

Josiah Bartlet and his language plan

At the turn of the century, the popular and well-received HBO series *The West Wing* tells the story of a fictional Democratic president, Josiah Bartlet, and his staff.

Half-way through Bartlet's second term, the American economy is in bad shape, putting Bartlet on the defensive in the public debate. His advisors are concerned about the White House's "lack of vocabulary." The president decides to take action:

> Okay,
> let's get on
> coming up with a language plan.[1]

Bartlet needs a plan, not about his strategy or policy, but about the language he should use. Evidently, language matters in politics. In this book I will examine how politicians use language when they participate in political debates, try to shape our opinions, or challenge their opponents' positions. But first the question is: why does language matter?

Why language matters in the world of politics

Politicians employ a wide range of strategies to achieve their goals – and language is one of them. What impact does their language have on us, on their opponents, on the public opinion?

Language shapes our perception of the world

In a well-known experiment, two groups of people are instructed to analyze the crime figures for a fictional city called Addison.[2] They are then asked to describe what strategy the authorities

should adopt to make the city safer. The language used in the instructions is different for each group. Group 1 is told that crime is like a predator lurking in an increasing number of neighborhoods, while Group 2 is told that crime is like a virus infecting an increasing number of neighborhoods. Both groups are then asked to analyze the numerical data and identify the best way to tackle the problem.

It turns out that the wording of the assignment affects the respondents' interpretation of the data. If crime is a predator, the natural response is to hunt it down. The first group accordingly opts for stronger enforcement. On the other hand, if crime is a virus, the natural response is to attack it at the source. The second group of respondents accordingly believes that efforts should focus on the causes of crime, such as poverty and lack of educational opportunities. One might be inclined to think that this is an obvious outcome given the heavy-handed nature of the metaphors employed. In a follow-up experiment, the instructions therefore refer only once to the predator or the virus, while the rest of the instructions consists of a detailed technical description of the case. In spite of this, the outcome is the same. Language shapes the way in which the respondents perceive the world.

Next – and this is where things really get interesting – the respondents are asked why they had chosen either approach. They all respond that their choice is based solely on the crime figures. The wording of the instructions has thus become the filter through which the respondents perceive the facts, but they are unaware of this. They think that their opinions are based on objective numerical data. This has enormous implications. Politicians who are able to impose their language can make us perceive the world through a specific filter without us even realizing it.

Language not only describes, but also creates a reality

In 1984, Stan Greenberg observes that many voters who have always voted Democrat had switched sides to Ronald Reagan's

Republicans.[3] He calls them Reagan Democrats. In doing so, he not only describes a reality but creates one as well. A new group of voters is called into existence as a result of this label, and this activates an entirely new dynamic. Journalists become interested in these Reagan Democrats and want to know why they have abandoned the Democratic Party. Discussions arise about their political positioning. Where is Reagan Democrat country? Winning back the Reagan Democrats becomes a key strategic issue for the Democrats. Without Greenberg's label, this group of voters would never have received so much attention.

A more recent example of this phenomenon: after 9/11, several right-wing populist parties with a strong anti-Islamic stance emerge in northwestern Europe. They introduce the term "Islamization," to describe Islam's increasing influence in Europe and the continent's transformation into "Eurabia" due to an influx of Islamic migrants.[4] The populist parties constantly talk about the Islamization of Europe, and the term has become so accepted that even their opponents have started using it. Once people look at the world through this filter, anybody who believes Islamization is really happening will start seeing it everywhere. Women wearing scarves, halal butchers, and an inflammatory sermon delivered by an imam, all serve to confirm that Europe is undergoing a process of Islamization.

Language thus both describes and creates reality. By the same token, a lack of vocabulary also has serious implications. The medical community's understanding of cancer and the number of available treatments have increased significantly in recent decades. However, according to several leading American scientists, the language we use to describe cancer is still stuck in the nineteenth century. Scans sometimes detect tumors that will probably not cause the patient any problems but are still referred to as "cancer." This dated and unsophisticated language has serious consequences, in that it causes needless anxiety and often leads to overtreatment, which is dangerous for patients and occasionally results in permanent harm. The American scientists therefore propose using more sophisticated language to describe

cancer, including the term "indolent lesions of epithelial origin" (IDLEs) for slow-growing or low-risk tumors.[5] Calling such tumors IDLEs rather than cancer can create an entirely different reality for patients.

Language evokes connotations – positive or negative

In the 1960s, left-wing politicians, in particular, develop proposals for providing every citizen with a government-funded *guaranteed minimum income*. Some right-wing politicians are also in favor of this idea, but the concept of a "guaranteed minimum income," especially one provided by the state, has too many left-wing, big-government connotations for their tastes. They therefore refer to it as a "negative income tax," which obviously sounds much better to right-wing voters. In most countries, the idea never took off, but a few decades later it finds its way back on to the political agenda. This time, anybody wishing to avoid associations with the 1960s did not refer to it as a "guaranteed minimum income" but as a "citizen's income."

Guaranteed minimum income, *negative income tax* and *citizen's income* are all roughly the same thing, but they have very different connotations. Those connotations matter, since they shape our judgments.[6] Here are a few more examples of words with powerful connotations.

Development aid: US president Jimmy Carter observes that the term "development aid" has negative connotations in the United States.[7] Anyone who tries to promote the issue immediately shoots himself in the foot by using this word. Instead, you could talk about "investments" in "emerging economies."

Compromise: Throughout his tenure as the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives during the Obama presidency, John Boehner refuses to use the word "compromise." "When you say the word 'compromise,' a lot of Americans look up and go, "Uh-oh, they're going to sell me out.' And so 'finding common ground' I think makes more sense," he explains in an interview.[8] For Europeans, who are accustomed to coalition governments,

this may seem like a strange position, but for American conservatives "compromise" appears to be dangerous language.

Christians: In 2015, ISIS militants murder a group of Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya. In a statement concerning the incident, the US State Department describes the victims as "Egyptian citizens" and does not refer to them as "Christians."[9] It chooses to do so because any mention of the victims' religion would only serve to reinforce the narrative that ISIS is seeking to impose on the conflict in Iraq and Syria, namely that it is involved in a "clash of civilizations," a struggle between Islam and Christian crusaders.

Deportation: US politicians talk about "deporting" illegal immigrants, but such language is unacceptable in Europe because of its connotations with the mass deportation – and extermination – of Jews there during World War II. European politicians therefore prefer to use other terms, such as "repatriation" or "return."

Language influences value judgments

Words instantly evoke certain connotations, including moral connotations. As a consequence of that, language can also be used to convey and influence value judgments.

The former French politician Dominique Strauss Kahn liked it to visit a "libertine evening." According to others, he is talking about an orgy. A libertine evening or an orgy – the words might evoke completely different connotations. Is a country faced with "illegal immigrants" or "undocumented workers"? When immigrants have obtained the right papers and their families join them – is this "family reunification" or "chain migration"? You can disqualify a peer who has comments on your work as "cynical" – although this peer is merely "critical." Is a manager "downsizing" or "rightsizing" an organization? "Reorganizing" or "modernizing"? Some politicians says that they are "realistic" – that they accept that refugees from war-torn zones will keep coming to the rich and free democratic world. No, say their opponents – you are not realistic, you are "fatalistic."

As said, language evokes positive or negative connotation, but might also influence our value judgments. An illegal immigrant did something wrong – and the law should be enforced. An undocumented worker is someone who contributes to our society and just lacks some bureaucratic papers – such a worker should not be condemned.

Table 1. Terms with more positive or more negative connotations

Positive	Negative
Libertine evening	Orgy
Undocumented workers	Illegal immigrants
Family reunification	Chain migration
Critical	Cynical
Rightsizing	Downsizing
Modernizing	Reorganizing
Realistic	Fatalistic

Language encourages (or discourages) action

Language can activate people. Imagine that the leadership of an organization is making a strategic plan which includes the possibilities of a merger. Many similar organizations have already merged or consider merging, leaving the sector with less, but bigger players. A well-known frame in situations like these is that a "strategic endgame" is going on.

The "endgame" comes from the world of chess and will color the peoples perception of the situation – because it implies that the final and decisive stage of the strategic planning process has been reached. In a strategic endgame, there is no time to wait and see what happens: it is time for action. Decisions have to be made.

During the 2008 banking crisis, it becomes apparent that ABNAmro, one of Europe's systemic banks – those banks that are deemed too big to fail – is close to collapse. In the past, the bank has made a series of bad strategic decisions concerning mergers with other banks. It has made those decisions because

its leaders were convinced that they were involved in a "global strategic endgame" in which any bank that did not participate in the ongoing wave of mergers would be too small to survive. In retrospect, this proved to be wrong. Pressured by the belief that this was a strategic endgame, those in charge made a number of disastrous decisions and the bank had to be saved from ruin by the government.[10]

Framing with language

If language matters, then the interesting question naturally arises: How do politicians use language to their advantage? How do they use it to convince us of the truth of their views? These questions take us into the world of political framing, which has attracted a lot of attention in recent times and forms the subject of this book.[11]

"Framing" is a phenomenon that we are already familiar with from the world of photo journalism. I could take a photo of a group of students attending my lecture. Everyone in the photo looks happy, except for three students who are looking extremely grumpy. Then what happens if I put a frame around the three grumpy students, focusing only on these three, and post the photo online along with a report about my lectures? Everyone who visits the page will see the disgruntled-looking students, and their first impression may be that the lectures were very boring and none too interesting. The frame in which something is presented influences our perception of reality.

It cannot be said that the framed photo presents an inaccurate image of the actual situation – there were indeed three grumpy students in the room. But framing does set off a process whereby we both overinterpret the reality (the three grumpy students) and underinterpret it (the other happy students). We do this not only with photos, but also with language. Table 1 presents a good example: if we call a reorganization at a company "downsizing," we overinterpreted the fact that people will be fired. We

underinterpret the fact that, by doing so, the company is adapting to changing market conditions. If we call the same reorganization "right-sizing," the process of over and underinterpretation is precisely the reverse.

A frame can be defined in two ways:

- As a filter through which people perceive the world (a "communication filter" or "neural circuit")
- As the structure of a message, aimed at activating a specific interpretation of the world (a "message frame")[12]

Frames as filters

Framing can refer to a process during communication in which filters or networks in the brain help individuals interpret information. In our complex world, people categorize, classify and interpret everything they experience to make sense of the world. These processes are guided by systems of interpretation, which are referred to as primary frameworks, (communication) filters, neural circuits or frames.

In 2003, the United States and the United Kingdom declare war on Iraq. In the preceding months, a debate rages in both nations as to whether or not such an invasion should take place. On the one hand, this debate can be presented in a "Vietnam frame." From this perspective, this type of war is enormously risky; the two countries could end up in a mire of violence from which it will be very difficult to extract themselves. On the other hand, the debate can also be presented in a "Chamberlain frame" – Neville Chamberlain was the British prime minister who severely underestimated Hitler during the 1930s. Those who view the war through the filter of a Vietnam frame are obviously open to very different information than those who view it through a Chamberlain frame.

Suppose an analysts tells us that one of the risks of a war is that Iraq divides into factions that begin fighting each other? For those who filter information through the Vietnam frame, this

instantly raises a red flag. A divided country has the connotation of a Vietnams-like swamp. Whereas those who espouse the Chamberlain perspective will quickly brush over this information – they see Iraq as an aggressor that seeks to attack other nations. They may feel that the possibility of Iraq dividing into competing factions might be a positive development: it would mean that Iraq could no longer be aggressive toward other countries.

Message frames

Framing can also refer to the way in which the message itself is structured. This is usually referred to as "message framing." People "frame" messages in order to emphasize a specific interpretation of the world and play down competing interpretations.[13] Message framing is about choosing the words, phrases and metaphors that invoke a specific interpretation of the world. The language that politicians use thus colors our perception of an issue: predator vs. virus, compromise vs. finding common ground, rightsizing vs. downsizing, Vietnam vs. Chamberlain. This might also be called "emphasis framing" – the process of over- and underemphasizing certain aspects of reality.[14]

In many cases, these two definitions overlap. Take the example concerning the fictional city of Addison, which deals with both the filtering and structure of messages. In this example, crime was "framed" as either a predator or a virus (message framing), but was also aimed at creating or activating internal frames that elicited different responses (frames as filters). Definitions not only overlap, there is also a process of mutual adaptation. Message framing can have an impact on people's filters. When politicians constantly employ a specific message frame (e.g., Europe is undergoing a process of Islamization), that frame may eventually become a filter that guides the audience's interpretation of the world. Likewise, politicians who know the dominant filters of their audience, may adapt their message, and make it compatible with these filters.

Structure of the book

This book examines the use of so-called "message frames" in the world of politics and policy.[15] Chapter 2 examines the characteristics and potential impact of message frames and clears up various misconceptions, such as the idea that conservative politicians are better framers than liberal politicians.

When politicians frame an issue in a certain way, their opponents will often try to reframe the debate. This game of framing and reframing is explored in Chapters 3-8. Each chapter presents a framing strategy and then discusses the most effective way to reframe the debate. Chapter 9 has a short reflection on framing: is framing morally right or wrong? It is an important question because framing is more than just spinning. Spinning has the connotation of propaganda, of biased interpretations. In Chapters 3-8 I will make clear that the game of framing and reframing can be conducive to the quality of political debates and decision-making – but there are more answers to the moral question about framing.

Framing is obviously not a new phenomenon, nor is it the preserve of right-wing politicians, as is sometimes suggested. I will therefore discuss both old and new examples of framing, as well as various left- and right-wing frames. The examples presented in this book have been carefully selected, in the hope that they will not only help you understand the game of framing and reframing but also show you how much impact you can have by using the right words.