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Framing Political Messages with Grammar and Metaphor

How something is said may be as important as what is said

Teenie Matlock

Millions of dollars are spent on campaign ads and other political messages in an election year, but surprisingly little is known about how language affects voter attitude and influences election outcomes. This article discusses two seemingly subtle but powerful ways that language influences how people think about political candidates and elections. One is grammar. The other is metaphor.

In an election year, voters are inundated with political messages from various sources, including television ads, campaign websites, blogs and social network forums, such as Facebook. Some of these messages focus on candidates' positions on various issues, including the economy, same-sex marriage, education and war. Some focus on candidates' personal characteristics. Is the candidate warm and accessible, or cold and distant? An autocrat or a team player? Family oriented? Not family oriented? Some messages focus on candidates' past actions, and others focus on their apparent abilities to tackle problems ranging from immigration to unemployment. Some messages are factual and objective, and others are exaggerated and sensationalized.

Political scientists, such as James Druckman of Northwestern University and Stephen Ansolabehere of Harvard University, study how political messages affect voting. Their work tells us

that voters' attitudes can be influenced by a number of factors, including which information the media chooses to emphasize and how it is slanted. *Framing*, how a message is worded to encourage particular interpretations and inferences, can influence the perception of political candidates. Negative framing is often used to make opposing candidates seem weak, immoral and incompetent. It is persuasive because it captures attention and creates anxiety about future consequences. When negative information becomes excessive, however, it can backfire and lead to deleterious outcomes, including low voter turnout. Negative framing can be effective even when subtle or indirect. For instance, people tend to align more closely with their parties when opposition is emphasized, and people may not want to vote for incumbent candidates when there are frequent reports about how bad times are.

It is no surprise that language in political messages affect people's attitudes about political candidates and more generally, elections. Just about anybody would form a low opinion of a politician who is described as a cocaine addict with a track record of accepting bribes, cheating coworkers and evading taxes by illegal means. What's interesting is *how* language has this influence, especially when it comes to framing effects. Particularly interesting is how the more subtle dimensions of language, including grammar and metaphor, can modify attitudes about political candidates.

Framing with Grammar

Grammar is something we learned in elementary school. We learned that sentences have a subject, a verb and, in some cases, an object. We learned

about irregular verbs, such as "went" and "flew." We learned about parts of speech, including nouns, verbs and adjectives. We learned about active versus passive sentences. We learned that tense signals when events happened in time: past, present or future. And more. What we did not learn is that grammar has meaning, and that it is linked to mental experience and physical interactions with the world. Although grammar is poorly understood and uninteresting to folks other than linguists and grammar teachers, it plays a critical role in our everyday reasoning.

Grammatical aspect occurs in English and many other languages. Its main purpose in a language is to express how events unfold in time. Grammatical aspect works with tense, modality and other systems in a language to provide the reader or listener with information about whether an event has started, whether it has finished, whether it has continued over a significant period of time and more. In English, a person can describe past events in a variety of ways. For instance, you see your friend Maria cycling one evening across campus, and the next morning you report, "Maria was riding her bike last night" or "Maria rode her bike last night." Both statements are perfectly acceptable English, and express the same event. However, there is a slight difference in how the action is construed. With the former, which uses the past progressive grammatical form (*was* VERB+ing), the event is conceptualized as ongoing. With the latter, which uses the simple past grammatical form (VERB+ed), the event is conceptualized as an entire, completed event. This distinction is common across languages, even though it is realized in different ways. For instance, Russian has a more com-

Teenie Matlock is McClatchy Chair in Communications and associate professor of cognitive science at the University of California, Merced. She has published over 50 articles that span linguistics, cognitive science and computer science, and is a standing member of the National Science Foundation's Language and Communication Study Section. She is the recipient of Sigma Xi's 2011 Young Investigator Award.



Figure 1. Campaigners undoubtedly have used language to frame political messages for as long as there have been campaigns. And for a similar length of time, recipients have not necessarily been well equipped to decode them. As an example, the earliest known visual use of a race as a metaphor for a political contest dates to 1769 from *Town and Country Magazine*. The riderless horse depicted is that of English radical John Wilkes. Wilkes had been re-elected to Parliament by his Middlesex constituents in February 1769 but was expelled by that body in March because of a parody he and Thomas Potter had written of Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*. The House of Lords deemed *An Essay on Woman* to be pornographic and blasphemous and labeled him an outlaw. The caption reads, "All Coursers the first Heat with Vigour Run; But 'Tis with Whip & Spur the Race is won." (Image courtesy of the U.S. Library of Congress.)

plex, nuanced aspectual system than English does.

A few years ago, I began exploring the idea of grammatical framing. In an article with Caitlin Fausey, "Can Grammar Win Elections?" published in *Political Psychology*, we explored the consequences of tweaking grammatical information in political messages. We discovered that altering nothing more than grammatical aspect in a message about a political candidate could affect impressions of that candidate's past actions, and ultimately influence attitudes about whether he would be re-elected. Participants in our study read a passage about a fictitious politician named Mark Johnson. Mark was a Senator who was seeking reelection. The passage described Mark's educational background, and reported some things he did while he was in office, including an affair with an assistant and hush money from a prominent constituent. Some participants read a sentence about actions framed with

past progressive (*was* VERB+ing): "Last year, Mark was having an affair with his assistant and was taking money from a prominent constituent." Others read a sentence about actions framed with simple past (VERB+ed): "Last year, Mark had an affair with his assistant and took money from a prominent constituent." Everything else was the same. After the participants read the passage about Mark Johnson, they answered questions. In analyzing their responses, we discovered differences. Those who read the phrases "having an affair" and "accepting hush money" were quite confident that the Senator would not be reelected. In contrast, people who read the phrases "had an affair," and "accepted hush money" were less confident. What's more, when queried about how much hush money they thought could be involved, those who read about "accepting hush money" gave reliably higher dollar estimates than people who read that Mark "accepted hush money." From these results, we

concluded that information framed with past progressive caused people to reflect more on the action details in a given time period than did information framed with simple past.

This effect of grammatical aspect is consistent with other research done in my lab, including a study with student collaborators on how people describe car accidents. In this study, to appear in *Studies in Language*, participants watched six videos of vehicle collisions on a computer screen. For example, in one video, a police car pursues a truck that swerves off the road and crashes into an overpass, and in another, a car sideswipes a van, which then smashes into a truck. After each video, one group of participants was presented with the prompt "Tell what was happening," and another was presented with the prompt "Tell what happened." Participants' descriptions were recorded and analyzed. Those who read the past progressive prompt included proportionally more motion verbs in their descrip-

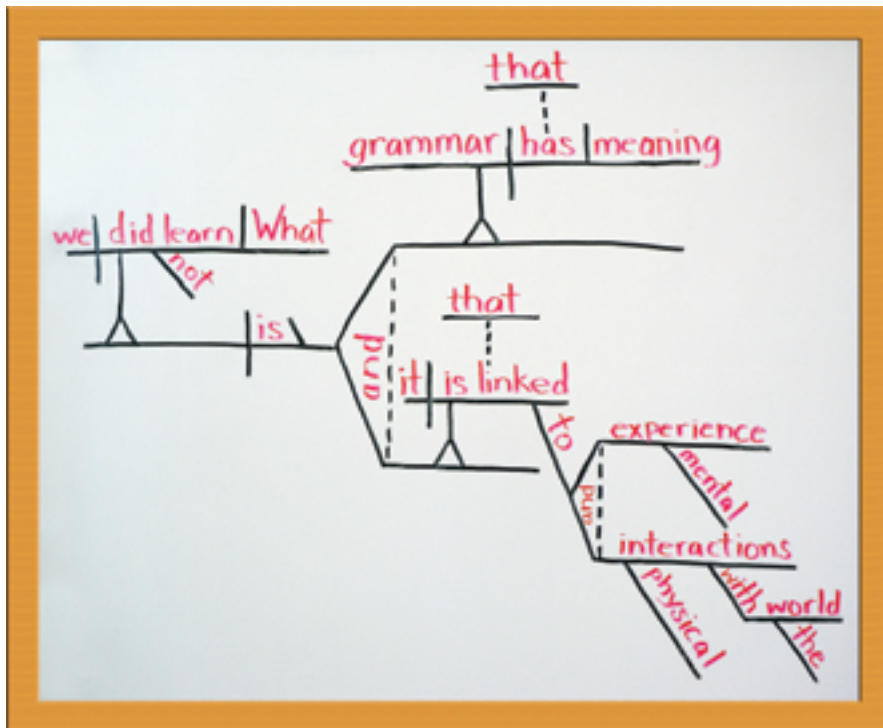


Figure 2. Anyone who has made it through grade school has been exposed to grammar. We were drilled on the parts of sentences, such as subjects, verbs and (sometimes) objects, and the categories of words, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on. We learned past versus present versus future tenses. Many of us were even taught to diagram sentences. What we were not taught, however, was that grammar encodes meaning. The author's research has shown that the simple choice between using the simple past tense versus past progressive, for example, affects how listeners or readers interpret the action described. Political messaging routinely employs such tactics (whether intentional or inadvertent) to sway voters. There were once many methods of sentence diagramming, but the method of mapping grammatical relations in a sentence used today was created in the late 19th century by Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg. Reed-Kellogg diagrams display parts of speech and their structure along a main, horizontal line, with vertical lines separating subject and predicate. In the sentence above, "What we did not learn" is a *cleft transformation*: It changes the order of parts of speech in a sentence for the sake of emphasis. "We did not learn that grammar has meaning..." would be more direct, but the transformation emphasizes the negated verb, "did not learn," and the "that" clauses that serve as subject complements.



tions, such as "drive," as in "There's a guy driving a truck," and "come," as in "Another car came," than did participants who read the simple past prompt. These same individuals also mentioned more reckless driving phrases, such as "cut off," as in "He tried to cut off the car next to him," and "swerve," as in "She was swerving." The results suggest that tweaking grammatical aspect in an open-ended question or prompt can lead to differences in thinking and talking about events.

Using grammatical aspect to frame campaign information, positive or negative, appears to be an effective tool for influencing how people perceive candidates' past actions. It may also be tweaked to invite inferences about what candidates will do in the future because it influences inferences about how events transpire.

Framing with Metaphor

In elementary school, we also learned about metaphor. Through reading literature, we learned that metaphor is used to create a special effect or feeling. William Shakespeare was the master of this. In his Sonnet 50, "How Heavy Do I Journey on the Way," for instance, Shakespeare metaphorically depicts the process of grieving from the loss of a dear friend as a journey that moves him from one emotional state to another: "My grief lies onward and my joy behind." The journey is portrayed as heavy and effortful: "The beast that bears me, tired with my woe, plods dully on, to bear that weight in me."

Metaphor is not restricted to literature. It pervades everyday conversation, blogs, text messages and many other forms of everyday language, including political ads. Linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson (no relation to the fictional political candidate Mark Johnson mentioned in the study above!) have argued that metaphor is much more than a literary device. They claim that metaphor is in fact a basic mechanism that en-

Figure 3. People have an innate tendency to describe events with action words, even though no actual motion may be involved. Hence the metaphor of a race for a political campaign is a natural—and one that President Obama used shortly after Usain Bolt won three gold medals at the London Olympics, noting that they would "have to run through the tape."

SET TO BETWEEN OLD HICKORY AND BULLY NICK,



This celebrated fight took place at Washington, in 1832. Hickory was seconded by Little Ven and Major Jack Downing, with Joe Tammany for bottle holder, Long Harry and Black Din were Nick's seconds, and Old Mother Bank bottle holder. Several long and severe rounds were fought, and from the immense bank bet, many of the fancy were losers to a large amount. Old Mother B. is said to have backed her champion to the tune of more than \$40,000. Nick's weight of metal was superior as well as his science, but neither were sufficient for the pluck and wind of Hickory, who showed his thorough training and sound condition in effectually that on the last round Nick was unable to come to time and gave in.

American Antiquarian Society

Figure 4. Pugilism has also been a common metaphor used in political campaigns. Candidates may “spar” over the issues or “trade punches” in debates. Here Andrew Jackson and Nicholas Biddle engage in a prize fight over the Second Bank of the United States. The Bank War, as it is known, ended in a technical knockout for Jackson, who vetoed the bank’s recharter in 1832, ending its exclusive control over the U.S. funds and currency.

ables people to understand one kind of thing, particularly something abstract, in terms of another thing that is more familiar and based on direct experience. For example, through our experiences with physical actions—walking across rooms, driving cars, riding bikes, reaching out to grab objects and watching others do the same hundreds of times each day—we are able to make sense of expressions like “Bob stepped into a bad situation,” “The instructor will walk us through the speech,” and “Have you reached a conclusion yet?” In each of these examples, motion verbs describe a state change but no actual physical movement takes place.

Motion metaphors run rampant in campaign-speak. Some are innocuous and merely describe candidates’ reflections on the current state of affairs. Right after the 2012 Olympics, for instance, Barack Obama shared his thoughts on the campaign ahead: “This is not going to be a race like Usain Bolt, where we’re like 40 yards ahead and we can just kind of start jogging 10 feet before the finish line,” referring to the Jamaican sprinter who won three gold medals at the games in London. “We’re going to have to run through the tape.” Here Obama used phrases such as “race,” “jogging” and “run through the tape” to describe his campaign as a footrace,

and he suggested that he would need to power across the finish line to win on election day. Around that same time, Paul Ryan, who had just been chosen as Mitt Romney’s running mate, commented, “We’re going to win this campaign. We’ve got the wind behind us. I’m really excited about this race.” Ryan’s comment was consistent with a race metaphor, but his use of “got the wind behind us” suggested that victory would be relatively easy. In many other forums, both Democratic and Republican candidates routinely talk about campaigns as races in this way.

Democratic campaign messages are emphasizing the idea of forward mo-



Figure 5. Direction of motion also features prominently in political messages. At left, an Obama commercial is titled “Forward,” which emphasizes progress and upward motion. A Romney website video uses the phrase “turn America around,” suggesting that the country has been going in the wrong direction. Similar motion metaphors have been used in campaigns by Presidents Reagan, G. H. W. Bush and Clinton.

tion in this year’s election. One Obama commercial titled “Forward” implies forward movement, first downward and then upward. To emphasize upward movement and to recruit other metaphorical elements, namely about improvement (“Things are looking up,” “blue skies”), a long list of Obama’s accomplishments, including, “4.2 million jobs saved” and “\$100 billion invested in science and research” scroll upward. The ad ends with Obama stating that “America is on the way up.” Interestingly, Obama’s forward messages are consistent with the phrase “stay the course,” which was used by Republican Ronald Reagan when campaigning for president in the 1982 mid-term elections, and later by George H. W. Bush in 1992.

Republicans seem to be using a variety of motion metaphors. Mitt Romney’s website implores donors to help him “turn America around,” suggesting that America needs to return to a different place, where it was before. This metaphorical framing is strengthened with campaign phrases like “It’s time for America’s comeback team.” The Republicans frame their message in this way to imply that the country has been going in the wrong direction under President Obama’s leadership and that change is needed. (Note that in the 1992 election, challenger Bill Clinton appealed to change using literal language: “Change vs. more of the same.”) And in a recent Republican Party ad, Paul Ryan promises to “put the nation back on a path to renewed prosperity for all,” suggesting that the country has been derailed and needs to be put back on track.

Using motion metaphors to frame messages in political campaigns is well motivated. It is in line with a large body of findings in cognitive science on how humans are wired to mentally simulate motion in all sorts of conditions, including even when nothing is actually moving. In 2004, I published results from an experiment on the interpretation of fictive motion sentences, non-literal statements that include motion verbs but describe no actual motion. I discovered that people simulate a fleetingly sense of motion when they inter-

pret sentences such as “The road goes through the desert,” “The trail runs through the wood” and “A fence follows the property line.” In a 2005 study with collaborators Lera Boroditsky and Michael Ramscar, I found that interpreting fictive motion sentences that varied by direction, such as “The road goes all the way to New York,” and “The road comes all the way from New York,” caused people to reason about time differently in a seemingly unrelated task. The results of these studies and others I have done provide evidence that people simulate motion even when motion is metaphorical. The results are in line with findings from neuroscience. When people view static images depicting humans in motion (for example, a man throwing a discus), motion perception areas in the brain are activated. When they view static images of humans moving along paths (for example, a man walking down steps), they mentally “fast-forward” to a position slightly farther along the path. And when people observe a human extending a hand to grasp an object, it activates the same brain areas that would be activated if they were doing the action themselves.

Taking Framing to the Next Level

Grammatical aspect works as a framing device because it involves mental simulation of actions. In some cases it enhances simulation, and in others it diminishes simulation. A message like “was having an affair” should be worse for a candidate than a message like “had an affair” because it implies more immoral actions, and sug-

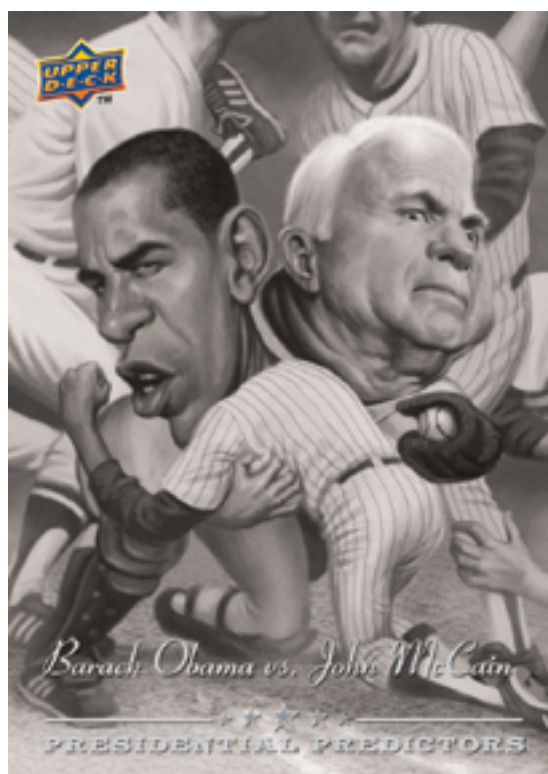


Figure 6. Games also feature prominently in political commentary. In this Upper Deck World of Politics card, John McCain appears to be attempting to tag out Barack Obama at the home plate. (Image courtesy of Upper Deck.)

gests that those actions may continue in the future. Metaphorical framing is effective for the same reason. People simulate movement and state change with figurative expressions, such as “America is on the way up” all the time. Campaign messages about forward movement into the future, turning things around or getting back on track are readily understood because they are grounded in people’s everyday understanding about how motion canonically works: along a path toward a destination.

What next? There are many ways that grammar can influence information in the popular media. Grammatical information, such as which person is used—for instance, first person, second person or third person—may have important implications for how people think about or align themselves with political candidates, and so might modal auxiliaries, for instance, “Yes, we can” versus “Yes, we will.” And there are many more uses of metaphor in political races, including phrases that refer to battles (“Romney draws battle lines in GOP acceptance speech”), uncleanness (“dirty campaign tactics”), and space (“Romney is distancing himself from Ryan’s Medicare cuts”).

The semantics of grammar and metaphor and their power in framing political issues is understudied. Differences in grammatical aspect or other grammatical forms may create wildly different inferences about when somebody will do something and in what way. And differences in metaphor can be used to magnify or enhance people’s attitudes about political candidates. We use grammar and metaphor all the time, but we have only begun to scratch the surface of how they shape our everyday thoughts and actions.

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