

What's Freedom?

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George Lakoff is a prominent cognitive scientist whose central insight (which is not to say that the idea originates with him) is that we can learn about the structure of our thoughts by looking carefully at the words we use to express them. For example, we think of time as a line, as you can see through phrases like “time line”, “looking forward”, “further in the past”, etc. Similarly, we thinking is thought of as a kind of seeing: “do you see what I mean?”, “pulled the wool over your eyes”, “as you can see from the book”, “his talk was unclear”, “that sentence is opaque”, etc.

Lakoff used these techniques to write a series of books describing the structures of various ideas (*Metaphors We Live By*, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, *Where Mathematics Comes From*, etc.) but after the Republican Revolution of 1994, he turned the technique on politics, resulting in his 1996 classic *Moral Politics*, which tries to explicate the cognitive models of Democrats and Republicans.

After the election of Bush₂, Lakoff began talking about how Republicans were better at “framing”, or using language to get people to agree with them, than Democrats. Lakoff that the process goes both ways: language causes your mind to think of certain concepts which create certain pathways in your brain. Thus Republicans, he said, through massive repetition of certain phrases, were literally changing the brains of the electorate to be more favorable to them. (“If this sounds a bit scary,” he writes, “it should. This is a scary time.”)

Around the 2004 election, Lakoff skyrocketed to fame among Democrats, who were convinced by his argument that fighting Republicans required not just giving into Republican frames, but reframing the debate themselves. He rushed out the slender book *Don't Think of an Elephant*, a cobbled-together guide on his basic ideas and how progressives could use them. The book stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks.

Now Lakoff is back with a more studied work, *Whose Freedom?*, which tries to focus in more detail on the differing views of one particular concept: freedom. Lakoff starts the book by noting that in his 2004 speech at the Republican convention, Bush used “freedom”, “free”, or “liberty” once every forty-three words. Most progressives think of this simply as a stunt — using feel-good symbols like flag and words like freedom to distract from the real issues. But Lakoff argues something much deeper is going on: Bush is trying to change the meaning of freedom itself.

So what is he trying to change it to? Right away, the book begins to fall apart. Lakoff's definition of freedom is so broad (it encompasses democracy, opportunity, equality, fairness, education, health, the press, the market, religion, the

military, academia, and privacy) as to be fundamentally meaningless: “Every progressive issue is ultimately about freedom,” he concludes. And yet freedom is kept on as the book’s organizing principle: instead of chapters about economics, religion, and foreign policy, we have the chapters “Economic Freedom”, “Religion and Freedom”, and “Foreign Policy and Freedom”.

This would be harmless if it was simply a rhetorical affectation, but Lakoff still seems to think is fundamentally about freedom. As a result, the chapters are not only weighed down with meaningless and silly attempts to connect the topic to freedom (“Life is a progressive issue, since progressive Christians are committed to promoting freedom, freedom from oppression and pain and freedom to realize one’s dreams.” — actual quote) but their actual substance is stripped bare, because it’s not discussed in its own right, but merely as an aid to the book’s discussion of freedom.

Thus instead of deriving his key theory of how family metaphors create political views, by showing how he discovered this and how it explains a lot about the world, he quickly asserts it and then tries to apply the idea to the empty void of “freedom”. The result is a book that is fundamentally vacuous — its main idea has no substance and its supporting ideas have no explanation.

And for a linguist, Lakoff has a surprisingly tin ear for language. His suggestions (like using the term “freedom judges” to respond to “activist judges”) are so bad that I assume they must not be meant to be taken literally (“judges that will fight for freedom” is more akin to what Lakoff means).

It’s unclear how the book got into this sorry state, but the good news is there’s hope. Lakoff’s Rockridge Institute has been putting out thoughtful and valuable guides on how to think and talk about various issues and they plan to publish their major work, the Progressive Manual, this summer. Let us hope that book does what this could not.

Disclosure: I received a free review copy of Lakoff’s book fedexed to me before the July 4 publication date.