

My name is Mette Bengtsson. I am from University of Copenhagen in Denmark. I have studied rhetoric for about five years now, and I plan to graduate this August. Apart from studying, I work in the Danish Parliament for the Danish Social Democrats. And for the last couple of years I have mainly been interested in political debate.

Today, I am going to tell you about my Master's thesis. I have been working on it for the last three months. It is a thesis about the use of frames in political debate. A thesis about the consequences that sometimes occur when politicians are trying to influence the way the public thinks with well-chosen words.

I am not presenting a final conclusion. I am in the process, and what you'll get is only my tentative work. I hope that you'll be helpful to develop some of my ideas by asking questions in the end of this session.

Okay, so how are we going to spend the next twenty minutes?

First I will tell you about the motivation for the whole project – my reading of George Lakoff, and how I was both fascinated and sceptical of his work at the same time during my reading.

After a short introduction to George Lakoff and my worries about his proposed strategies, I will present the main points in my analysis. My work on framing is based on examples from actual debates on Television, and the conclusions I draw are only possible because of this practical foundation. You can say that my process is abductive. That I move between theory and practice and back again to differentiate or add to the existing theory.

Until now I have found six problematic ways of framing. In the end of this paper I will present these and a selection of connected examples.

As a way of introducing I think it is appropriate to make a refutation. Framing is a very popular term, and I have met people with a doubtful attitude towards the term. And I understand. Framing is used in very different contexts. It is used in different sciences. It is used in very different ways. And yes, it is a very flexible and sometimes vague and undefined term.

Unfortunately, it will take up to much time to make an introduction to the entire field today. But I think it will be useful if I explain how I understand and use the term 'framing'. Hopefully this will help to make my position clear, and hopefully it will qualify and clarify my use of the term.

Three perspectives are important to understand how I work.

First of all I concentrate on the politicians' strategic use of frames in public debate. By this I mean the strategic use of certain words and phrases – as a conscious act to affect the public opinion. Other framing theorists focus on revealing or describing the worldview of a whole organisation or of a political party. This is not my approach. I look for the single strategic framing attempts, and I try to explain how these attempts affect the debate.

Secondly, I'm working on a textual level. This is also important to note because in framing theory we see theories on both a macro and micro level. As I said before, I use examples from political debates on Television. My conclusions are manifested in the concrete utterances – in the statements from the arguers. This is the way most rhetoricians work – on a textual level. And this is also the way I work.

And last but not least I'm interested in drawing a line between acceptable and unacceptable framing. I have a normative perspective according to the debate which is in opposition to the majority of framing theorists who have a descriptive purpose. While I worry about the debate and try to list the 'dos' and 'don'ts' according to the framing politicians, the majority of framing theorists stay on a descriptive level. They explain what happens. They explain the effect. My mission is different. My concern is to insure a public debate that qualifies the public to take an informed stand. I want to remind the framing politicians that they have an obligation towards the public – a democratic obligation. As Professor Christian Kock puts it (and I quote): *“Political debate should equip each audience member as well as possible to make his individual assessment of the relative relevance and weight of the arguments on both sides (or for that matter, all sides).”* (end of quote)

These three points are important to understand how I work – to sum up: 1) being concerned with the politicians' strategic use of frames in public debate, 2) being textual and 3) being normative.

Before I present my work, I also think that it is important to explain the motivation for the whole thing. What started my interest on the subject?

Mainly, it was the American linguist, George Lakoff, and his books about framing. Perhaps you have heard of “Don't Think of an Elephant” or “Whose Freedom”. In “Don't Think of an Elephant” Lakoff says (and I quote): *“Reframing is changing the way the public sees the world. It is changing what count as common sense. Because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently.”* (end of quote). And in “Thinking Point” which is one of his recent books, he says (and I quote again): *“Framing is not primarily about politics or political messaging, or communication. It is far more fundamental than that: Frames are mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality – and sometimes to create what we take to be reality. But the discovery and use of the term does have an enormous bearing on politics. Given our media-obsessed, fast-paced, talking-points political culture, it's critical that we understand the nature of framing and how it can be used.”*

So, how can I be sceptical about this fantastic piece of advice?

My major worry is that Lakoff is primarily concerned with effect. He has written several books about how to frame the debate. He has been very enthusiastic about The Democrats. But only a very few times he considers the ethical dimensions – and these few times, it is only very superficial. I respect his work. I really do. I think that he has done some very original and interesting thinking. But the lack of ethical considerations is a problem. What will happen if a greater number of politicians begin following Lakoff's framing advices? I know that several politicians already do that in both the US and in Denmark – probably also here in Canada. And I fear that this is just feeding the disillusionment with politicians.

In opposition to Lakoff – in the other end of the scale – we will find theorists as Ben Fritz, Bryan Keefer and Brendan Nyhan. They are the founders of spinsanity.com, and in a recent published book they say (and I quote): *“When words themselves are chosen for strategic advantage, the possibility of debating in good faith is lost.”* (end of quote)

To me it seems as if Fritz, Keefer and Nyhan have the same view on being strategic as Habermas. I don't know if you have read Habermas and know about his ethical rules? Number four concerns being strategic – that the arguer can't have hidden purposes or intentions.

You might think that I agree with this position. But it is not the case. I place myself between those two positions. On one hand, I am sceptical of Lakoff's focus on effect, but on the other hand, I do not agree with the idea that politicians can't be strategic.

Several rhetorical theorists agree with me here. That it is okay to be strategic in a political debate. That it is okay to be prepared and to consider the effect of one's words. And it is possible to find a balance between effect and ethical considerations. To back up my claim with one of the big thinkers, Nietzsche says (and I quote – I am sorry, but it is in German): "*Es gibt gar keine unrhetorische Natürlichkeit der Sprache, an die man appellieren könnte: die Sprache selbst ist das Resultat von lauter rhetorischen Künsten die Kraft.*" (end of quote) And our own Professor, Christian Kock, has also said (and I quote again): "*It is natural and legitimate for debaters to behave strategically, i.e., to debate with the intension of winning the debate.*" (end of quote)

So, with this introduction to the way I work, and with the introduction to my position among some of the major theorists in the field, let's now move on to the analysis.

My tentative conclusion is, as already mentioned, that the framing attempts *sometimes* – and I stress *sometimes* – hinders a debate that qualifies the public to make a qualified decision.

By analysing a great number of Danish television debates, I have found that there are mainly six problematic ways of framing – four ways that have to do with the dialectical level and two that have to do with the frame itself – an inherent problem you might say.

Let me first present the six problematic ways of framing, and then afterwards give you some examples. The six problematic ways are:

- 1) The arguer is framing instead of answering the given question.
- 2) When framing the arguer is too implicit.
- 3) The arguer is repeating him-/herself because he/she wants to found the frame. This takes up time and hinders other important arguments from being advanced.
- 4) The arguer is so obsessed framing that he/she is taking the other part in account for something which that person hasn't said.
- 5) With the frame the arguer sets up a dichotomy and thereby simplifies the debate.
- 6) With the frame the arguer establishes a connection on an unconscious level.

I have a great number of examples. Today I only have the time to give you a very small selection. I will give you three examples – no. 1, 5 and 6.

I have had some trouble translating the examples. And when preparing this paper it occurred to me that my examples are of course influenced by our culture. This means that I will have to make an extra effort to comment on our political system and the linguistic features during my presentation of the examples. Even though this might be difficult, I will give it a try.

1) Not answering:

The first example is an example of a politician who is so obsessed trying to frame the debate that she forgets to answer the given question. The politician is the leader of The Danish People's Party.

Before I present the example I will just tell you three things about The Danish People's Party. First, The Danish People's Party is a rather new political party. Secondly, one of their greatest missions is to fight for elder citizens and their rights. And thirdly, that most people in Denmark see the party as a right wing party – sometimes with very rabid attitudes – especially on people from foreign countries.

In the debate, where this example is taken from, the leader of the Danish People's Party is trying to found or establish her party in a central position according to the political left-right spectrum. She is repeating phrases like '*central position*' and '*middle*' over and over again. And one time during the debate she is presenting the frame instead of answering the given question. In the example she is asked why The Danish People's Party will not agree on a proposal from The Social Democrats to raise funds for the people who have taken an early retirement. Here the leader of The Danish People's Party is just repeating her spectrum-frame once again – even though it has absolutely nothing to do with the case.

She is saying (and I quote): "*About being in a **central position**. It is where it is good to be. It is where The Danish People's Party is right now. And it is very important to be in a **central position**. It is where we have been since the last election. We have been making lots of political agreements since then.*" (end of quote)

But why do I think that not answering is a problem? Not answering is a problem because the public then doesn't get the pros and cons for a given proposition. As citizens in a democracy we need to be informed of the motivation for different actions. Why wouldn't The Danish People's Party vote for extra money for the people who want an early retirement? Normally, they claim that they take care of the interests of the elder citizens. And here it seems that they are doing the complete opposite. If I am to vote for The Danish People's Party at the next election, they have to insure me that there is coherence – that what they say is coherent with the things they do.

Unfortunately, I haven't got the time to give you an example for every problem. So I will have to jump right to number 5.

##### 5) Dichotomy:

The fifth type of problem is an inherent problem. It is an example of a dichotomy. In recent years the leader of the Social Democrats in Denmark has used different types of dichotomies to frame the debate. One of those dichotomies is '*tax relief or welfare*'.

Let me first introduce a couple of examples from the hundreds of examples I have gathered on this dichotomy:

HTS (February 23th 2006): "*I don't want an exercise in saving. I am not making **welfare adjustments** with one hand just to do a **tax relief** with the other. And I believe that it will also be of our concern. The money that we save because of effectiveness should be used on **welfare improvements**.*"

HTS (February 23th 2006); *“In the future I believe that a distinction will emerge between The Governance, who wants a **tax relief** just before an election, and us, who only want a **tax relief** when the **welfare** has improved – the hospitals, the kinder gardens and the schools (...) **Tax relieves** are only possible when people, who we want to take care of, has an acceptable level of **welfare**.”*

And why is it a problem to repeat a dichotomy? The major problem about dichotomies is that they simplify the debate. You get a head line, but you don't get all the concrete explanation. You are left with sharp disagreements and paradoxes. You are left with a superficial debate.

The welfare or tax relief approach leaves the public with the impression that there is no third way out. It is either a tax relief or welfare. There is no possibility of doing both. And we don't get a more specific explanation founded in the actual actions. What kind of welfare? How? Why? When?

#### 6) Establishing connections on an unconscious level:

The sixth and last problem is also an inherent problem. It is an example of the establishment of connections on an unconscious level.

Let me again give you an example.

The example is like the other examples from a live debate on Television. In this programme the politicians around the table is discussing whether or not Turkey should be a member of the European Union. In the debate, Søren Krarup, who is a priest and a quite uncompromising member of The Danish People's Party, is trying to establish a connection between the Turkish people and being a Muslim. As I told you before The Danish People's Party is a quite hard on people from foreign countries. The interesting thing here is that you don't really notice the connection at first. But because I have seen the debate a couple of times, it suddenly occurred to me that Søren Krarup is the only one calling the Turkish people Muslims. That he is framing the people from Turkey according to their religion. But the problem here is that it is not an explicit claim. The other debaters name the Turkish people people from Turkey, Europeans, the population of Turkey etc.

In a recent debate the leader of the Danish Social-Liberal Party comments on this connection. She is saying: *“The Danish People's Party keeps saying Islam, Muslims and Islamism in one sentence – as if they where one. In that way they are creating a reality where all Muslims are suspicious terrorists”*.

I think that the establishment of unconscious connections is problematic because the discussion is working on an unconscious level. The arguer doesn't make a claim. He or she is not explicit, and because of that it is very difficult to the other arguers to comment on. Of course, Søren Krarup can be sceptical about letting populations with another religion into the European Union. He is free to say so. It is a free country. And you can say what you want. But when he chooses to do it in this way, it never becomes a real claim, and the other debaters can't really relate to it.

Okay now, to sum up. In this paper I have established a position between Lakoff on one hand and Fritz, Keefer and Nyhan on the other. I have established a position between the one-sided focus on effect and a strategy scared approach. I believe that it is okay to be strategic. That it is okay to frame. It is okay that the politicians want to win the debate. But at the same time I want the politicians to play by certain rules. I want a qualified debate, and by that I mean a debate that qualifies the public to take an informed stand.

**Framing the Political Debate - what are the consequences?**

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As a rhetorician I believe that we should pay attention to the increasing framing tendency in political debate. How does this tendency affect the debate? And is it possible to specify the problems that often occur? Is it possible to get more information about what is exactly going on?

I think that this is about it for now. So thank you for your time. And I hope that you have a lot of interesting questions. Please feel free to ask anything.