

Words Befitting A World View

Books Reviewed by John Rohe

*In the real world – beyond pedagogy,
beyond hypocrisy – language has two purposes:
to facilitate thought, and to prevent it.*
– Garrett Hardin, *Living Within Limits*

Words impart mobility for traffickers in the world of ideas. Two recent books, one from the right, and the other from the left, offer advice on the transportation modality.

From the left, George Lakoff addresses our mental “frames.” His enigmatic title, *Don’t Think of an Elephant!*, only pretends to negate the thought of an elephant. In fact, it prompts the image of an elephant. “When we negate a frame,” Lakoff claims “we evoke the frame.” Nixon proclaimed: “I am not a crook.” Negation evoked the frame.

Lakoff reveals how words and concepts fit within mental frames. He urges caution when approaching the unyielding hard wiring of the mind. For the disseminators of ideas, he sheds light on “manipulative frames” to reach an apprehensive audience.

Newsweek, *USA Today*, *Time*, the *New York Times*, and the *Boston Globe*, among others, have recognized Frank Luntz as a leading political and communication professional in the Republican party. In a pocket-sized 87-page booklet entitled *Talk Right; the Language of American 2004*, Luntz painstakingly

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selects terms for conservatives.

Lakoff, on the other hand, explains how “radical conservative” strategists exploit a bipolar relationship with their base. The strategists manipulate the majority to slash health care benefits against their medical interest, to vote tax breaks for the rich, and to despoil the environment of future generations while embracing family values. Lakoff ponders whether their rationality perished at the voting booth. Or whether a compelling message can to be found in the imagery evoked by carefully chosen whispers on the right.

These two books confirm the obvious; that politics is a raw war of words.

Lakoff draws the reader’s attention to vulnerabilities in our mental synapses. As a professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, he is uniquely well qualified to comment on the vexing effect of sound bites upon our neurological system.

Words elicit images. They inspire, seduce, or they can be ignored. Lakoff distinguishes how mental synapses accept or reject

certain words, concepts, and sound bites. Language resonating with our mental frames will be accepted. To invoke a sound bite destined for rejection is functionally equivalent to hollering dissonant chords up the wrong neurological drain pipe.

Lakoff transforms the political landscape into a chessboard of words. In this contest of comments, Lakoff points to a *Washington Post* poll. Notwithstanding the absence of supporting evidence, 70% of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein collaborated with Al Qaeda in attacking the World Trade Center. Lakoff explains the contradiction with neurological considerations.

**Don’t Think of an
Elephant! Know
Your Values and
Frame the Debate**

by George Lakoff
White River Junction, VT:
Chelsea Green Publishing
124 pages, \$10.00

**Talk Right: A Language
of America 2004**

by Frank Luntz
Washington, DC: Luntz Research
87 pages, \$11.00



An artist's canvas fits a frame. In Lakoff's view, the art of language must also fit the frame; a mental frame. A misfit benefits neither the artist nor the audience. To understand Lakoff's frame is to appreciate art in the chosen word.

Synapses are the brain's wiring in which concepts are stored. When an incoming message fits within the synapse, it is accepted. When it does not fit, it is deflected. Incoming data is screened. Lakoff invites the reader to fit within the mind's frame by invoking the moral high ground.

Luntz is no stranger to this process. Straddling the line between obliging reality and appeasing the listener is not for the faint of heart. Luntz encourages Republicans to adopt morally conformable words like preserve, protect, safer, and cleaner when speaking of the environment. Lakoff calls this "reframing," or "manipulative framing." Presidential speech writers prove the process by invoking one frame, while ushering in another. Thus, Lakoff points out that the President's Clear Skies Act increases air pollution. His Healthy Forest Initiative promotes clear-cuts.

Lakoff tenders the moral high ground in a responsive frame: "No tree left behind." He would also reframe environmental advocacy with a positive spin, such as "pollution-free communities." Mercury would be his "first pollutant of choice to go."

According to Luntz, the language of politics "favors those who have enough respect for people to speak the truth." Lakoff, on the other hand, claims Luntz' language prevents more thought than it promotes. For example, in promoting an energy policy, Luntz urges politicians to offer assurances that they will "preserve and protect" the environment while taking a "balanced approach to developing the energy sources." Similarly, Luntz urges conservatives to seek a "fair balance" between the environment and the economy. In Lakoff's reframe, if the sanctity of everyplace is balanced against economic imperatives, no "poison-free communities" will survive.

Luntz urges the gun lobby to avoid framing a message as "pro-gun." Rather, he promotes "anti-crime and pro-values." ("Don't think of an elephant!")

Lakoff was perplexed by apparent contradictions among conservatives. Why, for example, are conservatives united on abortion, taxation, gun control, the death penalty, and tort reform. Is there a common theme? How does compassion for a one-month old fetus

align with passion for the death penalty after birth? Eventually, Lakoff realized that the opposing views also fell into curious alignment for progressives. Introspection and the consideration of family values enabled Lakoff to explain the rift between the right and the left. Conservatives adhere to a strict father model. Progressives lean toward the nurturant parent morality.

When a person's world view is inspired by the strict father model, there will likely be an affinity for the pro-gun lobby, for a retaliatory preemptive war, for punishment, including the death penalty, and for opposition to abortion. The nurturant parent morality promotes diplomatic negotiations. It encourages planned and wanted children. It finds sacredness in the earth, while fostering notions of sustainability. It spurns authoritarian regimes, gun advocates, anti-choice enthusiasts, and NASCAR dads.

The opposing ends of the political spectrum appeal to different mental synapses. Both authors play to neurological pathways with targeted appeals.

Fitting the language of the debate into the majority's world view has become the all-consuming mind game of political pundits. Thus, Lakoff points out that President Bush will avoid the phrase "gay marriage." In his agenda, the words are oxymoronic. If the phrase "gay marriage" steadily slips into common parlance, it becomes more routine, and thus more readily accepted. Progressives, on the other hand, frame the issue as whether the state can regulate whom we love. Lakoff urges the moral high ground, talking sanctity, love, and commitment. He speaks of "traditional common sense values."

The significance of frames in our synapses becomes apparent in the abortion debate. Have you ever tried to change someone's position on abortion? Unless the message can be fit within the frames by which information is processed, the argument is destined to fail.

Lakoff offers advice on the gentle art of persuasion. The nurturant parent's view will customarily be rejected by the strict father model. Lakoff, however, remains poised to stalk opportunities in reframing the issue. Even the strict father's mindset has a nurturant side. It would oppose the forced sale of a parent's home in the golden years. "While the nurturant model is active for them," Lakoff recommends "linking it to politics." By invoking images of respect and dignity for elderly parents, Lakoff finds a ray of hope for progressives to connect with conservative synapses.

In the marketplace of ideas, words now stalk neurotransmitters with increasing precision. The words are selected to resonate with circuitry in human minds. Gray matter of the unwary voting public offers a playground for political influences.

The ultimate conclusion to be drawn from these two books is not whether the right or the left has a monopoly on substantive truth and justice. Rather, both authors concur that the form of expression plays more prominently than even the substance.

There is a message for immigration reformers within the covers of these two short paperbacks. Reformers commonly see rationality and reason sacrificed on the altar of semantics. A discussion on immigration can founder on the shoals of clichés or, worse yet, preconceived hostilities. “We,” according to a familiar chant, “have always been a nation of immigrants.” By this point in the conversation, it might be too late to observe that every nation, with the possible exception of Ethiopia, is a nation of immigrants. Yet, only the United States receives more settlers than all other nations combined. Reformers might avert the reflexive “nation of immigrants” response with a reframe. This could require inventing a new dialogue. For example, instead of discussing “immigration,” the topic becomes “mass immigration.” We have never been a “nation of mass immigration.”

The relative popularity between the Lakoff and Luntz views might still be governed by a biological reality. Fertility rates around the globe remain high in male-dominated societies. Unsurprisingly, the strict father model produces more offspring than the nurturant parent. Thus, fertility rates in the red states are higher than in the blue. Evolutionary psychologists would note that the strict father synapse replicates itself more rapidly than the nurturant parent morality.