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A Man of His Words

In this excerpt from his new book, "Don't Think of an Elephant!" George Lakoff talks about how transforming the language of politics can help win the good fight.

The following is an excerpt from the first chapter of "Don't Think Of An Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate," published by Chelsea Green Publishing.

Framing 101: How to Take Back Public Discourse

January 21, 2004 — On this date I spoke extemporaneously to a group of about two hundred progressive citizen-activists in Sausalito, California. When I teach the study of framing at Berkeley, in Cognitive Science 101, the first thing I do is I give my students an exercise. The exercise is: Don't think of an elephant! Whatever you do, do not think of an elephant. I've never found a student who is able to do this. Every word, like elephant, evokes a frame, which can be an image or other kinds of knowledge: Elephants are large, have floppy ears and a trunk, are associated with circuses, and so on. The word is defined relative to that frame. When we negate a frame, we evoke the frame.

Richard Nixon found that out the hard way. While under pressure to resign during the Watergate scandal, Nixon addressed the nation on TV. He stood before the nation and said, "I am not a crook." And everybody thought about him as a crook. This gives us a basic principle of framing, for when you are arguing against the other side: Do not use their language. Their language picks out a frame — and it won't be the frame you want. Let me give you an example. On the day that George W. Bush arrived in the White House, the phrase "tax relief" started coming out of the White House. It still is: It was used a number of times in this year's State of the Union address, and is showing up more and more in preelection speeches four years later. Think of the framing for relief. For there to be relief there must be an affliction, an afflicted party, and a reliever who removes the affliction and is therefore a hero. And if people try to stop the hero, those people are villains for trying to prevent relief.

When the word tax is added to relief, the result is a metaphor: Taxation is an affliction. And the person who takes it away is a hero, and anyone who tries to stop him is a bad guy. This is a frame. It is made up of ideas, like affliction and hero. The language that evokes the frame comes out of the White House, and it goes into press releases, goes to every radio station, every TV station, every newspaper. And soon the New York Times is using tax relief.

And it is not only on Fox; it is on CNN, it is on NBC, it is on every station because it is "the president's tax-relief plan." And soon the
Democrats are using tax relief — and shooting themselves in the foot.

It is remarkable. I was asked by the Democratic senators to visit their caucus just before the president's tax plan was to come up in the Senate. They had their version of the tax plan, and it was their version of tax relief. They were accepting the conservative frame. The conservatives had set a trap: The words draw you into their worldview.

That is what framing is about. Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary — and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas. There was another good example in the State of the Union address in January. This one was a remarkable metaphor to find in a State of the Union address. Bush said, "We do not need a permission slip to defend America." What is going on with a permission slip? He could have just said, "We won't ask permission." But talking about a permission slip is different. Think about when you last needed a permission slip. Think about who has to ask for a permission slip. Think about who is being asked. Think about the relationship between them.

Those are the kinds of questions you need to ask if you are to understand contemporary political discourse. While you are contemplating them, I want to raise other questions for you. My work on politics began when I asked myself just such a question. It was back in the fall of 1994. I was watching election speeches and reading the Republicans' "Contract with America." The question I asked myself was this: What do the conservatives' positions on issues have to do with each other? If you are a conservative, what does your position on abortion have to do with your position on taxation? What does that have to do with your position on the environment? Or foreign policy? How do these positions fit together? What does being against gun control have to do with being for tort reform? What makes sense of the linkage? I could not figure it out. I said to myself, These are strange people. Their collection of positions makes no sense. But then an embarrassing thought occurred to me. I have exactly the opposite position on every issue. What do my positions have to do with one another? And I could not figure that out either.

That was extremely embarrassing for someone who does cognitive science and linguistics.

Eventually the answer came. And it came from a very unexpected place. It came from the study of family values. I had asked myself why conservatives were talking so much about family values. And why did certain values count as "family values" while others did not? Why would anyone in a presidential campaign, in congressional campaigns, and so on, when the future of the world was being threatened by nuclear proliferation and global warming, constantly talk about family values?

At this point I remembered a paper that one of my students had written some years back that showed that we all have a metaphor for the nation as a family. We have Founding Fathers. The Daughters of the American Revolution. We "send our sons" to war. This is a natural metaphor because we usually understand large social groups, like nations, in terms of small ones, like families or communities.

Given the existence of the metaphor linking the nation to the family,
I asked the next question: If there are two different understandings of the nation, do they come from two different understandings of family?

I worked backward. I took the various positions on the conservative side and on the progressive side and I said, "Let's put them through the metaphor from the opposite direction and see what comes out." I put in the two different views of the nation, and out popped two different models of the family: a strict father family and a nurturant parent family. You know which is which. Now, when I first did this — and I'll tell you about the details in a minute — I was asked to give a talk at a linguistics convention. I decided I would talk about this discovery. In the audience were two members of the Christian Coalition who were linguists and good friends of mine. Excellent linguists. And very, very good people. Very nice people. People I liked a lot. They took me aside at the party afterward and said, "Well, this strict father model of the family, it's close, but not quite right. We'll help you get the details right. However, you should know all this. Have you read Dobson?"

I said, "Who?"

They said, "James Dobson."

I said, "Who?"

They said, "You're kidding. He's on three thousand radio stations."

I said, "Well, I don't think he's on NPR. I haven't heard of him."

They said, "Well, you live in Berkeley."

"Where would I . . . does he write stuff?"

"Oh," they said, "oh yes. He has sold millions of books. His classic is Dare to Discipline."

My friends were right. I followed their directions to my local Christian bookstore, and there I found it all laid out: the strict father model in all its details. Dobson not only has a 100-to-200- million-dollar-a-year operation, but he also has his own ZIP code, so many people are writing to order his books and pamphlets. He is teaching people how to use the strict father model to raise their kids, and he understands its connection to rightwing politics.

The strict father model begins with a set of assumptions:

The world is a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good. What is needed in this kind of a world is a strong, strict father who can:

- Protect the family in the dangerous world,
- Support the family in the difficult world, and
- Teach his children right from wrong.

What is required of the child is obedience, because the strict father is a moral authority who knows right from wrong. It is further assumed that the only way to teach kids obedience — that is, right from wrong — is through punishment, painful punishment, when they do wrong. This includes hitting them, and some authors on conservative child rearing recommend sticks, belts, and wooden paddles on the bare bottom. Some authors suggest this start at birth, but Dobson is more liberal. "There is no excuse for spanking babies younger than fifteen or eighteen months of age." The rationale behind physical punishment is this: When children do something wrong, if they are
physically disciplined they learn not to do it again. That means that they will develop internal discipline to keep themselves from doing wrong, so that in the future they will be obedient and act morally. Without such punishment, the world will go to hell. There will be no morality.

Such internal discipline has a secondary effect. It is what is required for success in the difficult, competitive world. That is, if people are disciplined and pursue their self-interest in this land of opportunity, they will become prosperous and self-reliant. Thus, the strict father model links morality with prosperity. The same discipline you need to be moral is what allows you to prosper. The link is the pursuit of self-interest....

Now let me talk a bit about how progressives understand their morality and what their moral system is. It too comes out of a family model, what I call the nurturant parent model. The strict father worldview is so named because according to its own beliefs, the father is the head of the family. The nurturant parent worldview is gender neutral.

Both parents are equally responsible for raising the children. The assumption is that children are born good and can be made better. The world can be made a better place, and our job is to work on that. The parents’ job is to nurture their children and to raise their children to be nurturers of others.

What does nurturance mean? It means two things: empathy and responsibility. If you have a child, you have to know what every cry means. You have to know when the child is hungry, when he needs a diaper change, when he is having nightmares. And you have a responsibility — you have to take care of this child. Since you cannot take care of someone else if you are not taking care of yourself, you have to take care of yourself enough to be able to take care of the child. All this is not easy. Anyone who has ever raised a child knows that this is hard. You have to be strong. You have to work hard at it. You have to be very competent. You have to know a lot. In addition, all sorts of other values immediately follow from empathy and responsibility. Think about it.

First, if you empathize with your child, you will provide protection. This comes into politics in many ways. What do you protect your child from? Crime and drugs, certainly. You also protect your child from cars without seat belts, from smoking, from poisonous additives in food. So progressive politics focuses on environmental protection, worker protection, consumer protection, and protection from disease. These are the things that progressives want the government to protect their citizens from. But there are also terrorist attacks, which liberals and progressives have not been very good at talking about in terms of protection. Protection is part of the progressive moral system, but it has not been elaborated on enough. And on September 11, progressives did not have a whole lot to say. That was unfortunate, because nurturant parents and progressives do care about protection. Protection is important. It is part of our moral system.

Second, if you empathize with your child, you want your child to be fulfilled in life, to be a happy person. And if you are an unhappy, unfulfilled person yourself, you are not going to want other people to be happier than you are. The Dalai Lama teaches us that. Therefore it is your moral responsibility to be a happy, fulfilled person. Your moral responsibility. Further, it is your moral responsibility to teach your child to be a happy, fulfilled person who wants others to be happy and fulfilled. That is part of what nurturing family life is about. It is a common precondition for caring about others.
There are still other nurturant values.

- If you want your child to be fulfilled in life, the child has to be free enough to do that. Therefore freedom is a value.
- You do not have very much freedom if there is no opportunity or prosperity. Therefore opportunity and prosperity are progressive values.
- If you really care about your child, you want your child to be treated fairly by you and by others. Therefore fairness is a value.
- If you are connecting with your child and you empathize with that child, you have to have open, two-way communication. Honest communication. That becomes a value.
- You live in a community, and that the community will affect how your child grows up. Therefore community-building, service to the community, and cooperation in a community become values.
- To have cooperation, you must have trust, and to have trust you must have honesty and open two-way communication. Trust, honesty, and open communication are fundamental progressive values – in a community as in a family. These are the nurturant values – and they are the progressive values. As progressives, you all have them. You know you have them. You recognize them.

Every progressive political program is based on one or more of these values. That is what it means to be a progressive. There are several types of progressives. How many types? I am asking as a cognitive scientist, not as a sociologist or a political scientist. From the point of view of a cognitive scientist, who looks at modes of thought, there are six basic types of progressives, each with a distinct mode of thought. They share all the progressive values, but are distinguished by some differences:

1. Socioeconomic progressives think that everything is a matter of money and class and that all solutions are ultimately economic and social class solutions.

2. Identity politics progressives say it is time for their oppressed group to get its share now.

3. Environmentalists think in terms of sustainability of the earth, the sacredness of the earth and the protection of native peoples.

4. Civil liberties progressives want to maintain freedoms against threats to freedom.

5. Spiritual progressives have a nurturant form of religion or spirituality, their spiritual experience has to do with their connection to other people and the world, and their spiritual practice has to do with service to other people and to their community. Spiritual progressives span the full range from Catholics and Protestants to Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Goddess worshippers, and pagan members of Wicca.

6. Anti-authoritarians say there are all sorts of illegitimate forms of authority out there and we have to fight them, whether they are big corporations or anyone else.

All six types are examples of nurturant parent morality. The problem is that many of the people who have one of these modes of thought do not recognize that theirs is just one special case of something more general, and do not see the unity in all the types of progressives. They often think that theirs is the only way to be a true progressive. That is sad. It keeps people who share progressive values from coming together. We have to get past that harmful idea. The other side did.

George Lakoff is the author of the forthcoming "Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate" (Chelsea Green). He is Professor of Linguistics at the University of California at
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