

Perspectives on Perspectives

Alignment of Framings and Readings across Party Affiliations

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In my paper I will present the discourse analytic methodology and some early results from my current research project. The 'Frame Project' addresses fundamental questions of public opinion formation by analysing very closely how people make sense of political discourses in the mass media.

Politics is a struggle over meanings. The assertion and normalisation of representations is fundamental to almost all political action, determining what is 'politically feasible' at a certain point in time. In order to gain credibility and support, political actors need to frame the public debate: They need to establish their definition of a current social or political problem, their interpretation of what principles and values are involved, of what needs to be done, and who is competent and able to do something about it. Framing and reframing structures the way the public sees the world (Lakoff 2004). A dominant frame can "determine what counts as a fact and what arguments are taken to be relevant and compelling" (Schön/Rein 1994, 23). In making sense of a cacophony of adversarial discourses, audiences make use of a social and political knowledge to 'mono-semise' what they see and hear. In this sense we can say that understanding involves a high degree of recognition, because even the stringent assessment of 'facts', or what different politicians refer to as 'facts', must overwhelm almost every individual's socio-political expertise (Iyengar 1991: 7).

On the other side this means that political actors face a fundamental problem, when addressing heterogeneous audiences over the mass media, and trying to establish their political propositions and interpretations: The majority of audiences normally will not share the perspectives they regard as social and political knowledge. Only a minority of sympathizers will be susceptible to a politicians' implicit evaluations, to these they will be common sense, close-to-experience social knowledge. 'Ideological' ways of speaking gain much of their function by being recognizable from the use of a specific political vocabulary and representational format (Dieckmann 1969: 32) – but many, if not most audiences inevitably will recognize these discourses and propositions as expression of an ideological background they oppose.¹ In this way framing and reframing effects rooted in the recognizability of discourses can amount to a complete 'tilting' of the meanings implied by political actors. In fact, when audiences find their own way through antagonistic problem definitions, competing diagnoses of cause and effect, moral judgments and implicit remedies in public discourse, reframing or even 'tilting' meanings can be regarded as a basic process of their understanding (or should we say: 'constructive misunderstanding').

But, viewed from a macro-perspective we can assume that it is exactly this situation, which is crucial to how political propositions can become hegemonic: when political actors are able to establish their interpretational patterns beyond their 'logical' clientele or constituency in terms of party affiliation and social background. Where interpretative frames and their definitions of social roles, problems and conditions successfully spread to a wider public and start to be treated as 'common sense', one can expect to find a basic leverage point of social and political dynamics.

¹ And Discourse Analysis teaches us that no language use is ideologically 'innocent' (Fairclough 1989; Hodge/Kress 1993; Potter 1996)

The 'Frame Project' ('Interpretive Frames in the Perception of Televised Political Debates') uses a highly complex methodology of Discourse Analysis and audience research to analyse the antagonistic ways competing discourses structure people's perception of a complex social and political world. We take current live-discussions from the evening news of Austrian television and present them to various groups of audiences, at a time when the matters discussed are still rather new to them - normally within a week after the original broadcasting. The reception-groups are then invited to explain what is going on and what they think about it. What we do with these data is to analyse, how political actors try to establish their interpretive frames of political issues, and exploring their influences on the interpretational orientations of audience groups from different social milieus and with different party affiliations.

In the first part of my presentation I will explain the methodological design of our qualitative study, the non-directive focus groups, and the combination of various methods of Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis we use to examine the materials recorded from the audience groups. The latter is to a high degree our own methodological development, a method which enables us to diagnose in very much detail, how audience members approach elements of the competing political propositions, how they mobilise certain parts of their own social and political knowledge, how their knowledge fits to these propositions and makes them acceptable to them, and how they reframe all these elements, propositions and knowledge to construct their own version of what is at stake.

In the second part of my paper I will then present some early results from our study, an example from a recent political discussion where the leader of the Green party tries to address a broader audience by using a rather conservative, nationalistic framing. The example shows that politicians are pretty much aware of the problematic in talking to a mixed audience, and react to it by adopting a - what Bakhtin has called - 'heteroglot rhetoric'. Heteroglossia or partial frame adoption is one of the discursive strategies by which politicians seek to establish and normalize their interpretations (Gotsbachner 2003). My empirical case demonstrates also the dangers of such rhetoric, because what audience members make of it, transforms the politicians original proposition into a very different story.

Research Design

The televised live-discussions we use as stimulus materials in our audience groups are actual broadcastings, so we have to monitor television news regularly, wait for a suitable discussion for recording and then react quite quickly. The Austrian public television ORF frequently invites competing political actors (like ministers, delegates of political parties, top civil servants, etc.) to the news room and allocates them ten to twelve minutes time to discuss their competing views on current political events. These panel discussions between political opponents take place in the same evening news, where these events are reported, so that for the audience 'information' and politically motivated representations are inextricably mixed. Here, where meanings are disputed and negotiated, we have a basic condition of politics condensed in a specific event, as the actors have only limited time to bring across their propositions. It is an ideal material for studying because whatever politicians use as discursive strategies to establish their frames, in a live discussion on TV they have to do it in a very clear and condensed form.

The current political discussions from the news are then presented to 'organic' groups of TV-consumers - up to now we have collected five televised discussions and presented them to four or five audience groups each, groups which are selected for their different socio-cultural and political backgrounds. These small audience groups are continuously recruited during sociological fieldwork

in different social milieus and should be ‘organic’, not artificially arranged groups, i.e. people who actually live and/or watch TV together, like groups of fellow-lodgers, families, mates or friends, normally comprising of 2-4 people. Our intention is to use groups which have a more or less common discursive repertoire when talking about politics, and the arrangement of our ‘non-directive focus group-interviews with an initial stimulus’ is tailored systematically to mobilize their habitualised discursive routines. The audience research normally is conducted in the groups own living rooms where they feel free and comfortable, and the stimulus-discussion is played on their own TV-set. The initial question is formulated very openly, asking them what they have seen and what they think about it, and assuring them that the researcher will let them talk among themselves for about an hour rather than asking questions all the time. This is important to make sure that they can develop their accounts according to their own interpretational patterns and framings, prompting each other by mutually providing cues and key-words for the further elaboration of topics. In this way the audience reactions to the selected political debate can be considered to reflect the audience groups’ own relevancies, formulated in their own framings, and actually documenting the richness of their thoughts involved in processing what they see. The arrangement provides for the participants using a communicative repertoire which comes close to their daily conversations, the repertoire they normally use in talk to assure themselves of their socio-political perspectives on current affairs.

In the core this is our solution to a general problem of qualitative research: To know that it is futile to pretend there could be something like a how-so-ever ‘neutral’ situation of data-collection, or to compensate for distortions of interviewer-effects, hidden patterns of selection etc., through the balancing blessings of big numbers. Instead, our qualitative approach is to use insights into the inner social dynamics of certain social situations, insights of how these social situations - like for example telling somebody a story - actually work, and which can be used deliberately to advance processes that accommodate the demands of our research interests. All the settings and precautions I mentioned about our mode of data-collection are arranged for this purpose, that the data can be expected to actually provide this quality: To reflect what is important to the audience members themselves and that they feel free to talk about whatever comes to their mind when they see these TV-discussions and explain to an outsider, how it makes sense to them.

All audience materials are recorded in high definition audio (video recording would be too obtrusive) and transcribed minutely according to Jeffersonian standards of Conversation Analysis (Jefferson 2004). One of the advantages of our method of analysing the transcripts is to be able to control if the setting actually worked to accommodate our intentions. To show, how we do it, will need to lay out some of our methodological and theoretical sources. I will try to give you just a short comprehensive outline of it.

Analyses of the reception materials and of the political debates themselves are conducted by the research team collectively in extensive analytic sessions, which make up for most of our working time. The two different kinds of materials are analysed each in their own right, closely following the sequential development of interaction in the transcripts, clause by clause, turn by turn. We are orienting to a methodology close to Conversation Analysis or ‘Gesprächsanalyse’ which treats the local constitution of meaning in interaction as an accomplishment, where analysts can draw on the accounting practices of the participants to reconstruct their manifest understandings. Participants own understandings become manifest for instance in their answers to other group members, because these already contain an interpretation of what has been said before.

A methodological element closer to a more sociological kind of Discourse Analysis we employ in reconstructing what participants treat as normal and self-evident, which is basically the analytic clue to what kinds of social and political patterns of meanings they take for granted as common sense, close-to-experience social knowledge, and which discourses they draw on in doing so. They become manifest also in their argumentative connections, what participants see as causes for what phenomena, and how they put things together as quasi 'naturally' related. In this way each reception-group-recording is comprehensively reconstructed for the participants own framing of the discussion, their depiction of the competing political actors and the socio-political situation discussed, but also their own political positioning and their general view on politics, democracy and the media.

For analysing the political TV-discussions themselves we use our own discourse analytic method to examine the strategies used by politicians trying to establish their concurring readings against each other (Gotsbachner 2008; 2009). It builds on an empirical model of what kinds of rhetorical and argumentative requirements are intrinsic to the 'normal form' of the socially established format 'political live-discussions on TV', and how the political actors need to combine efforts on three different levels to cope with these pressures. On the plane of activity they need to extend their capacity to act in establishing their themes as interactionally focused objects and gain control over the situational distribution of talking rights. On the plane of competing interpretive framings political actors need to introduce interpretations which cast the emerging political problems, conditions and events in their own perspectives and connect them to a conclusive storyline which makes up for their interpretative frames. And on the plane of socio-culturally established meanings they need to present their propositions, interpretations and framings as legitimate instantiations of strategically selected values, worldviews and ideologies which are commonly accepted in our society. In describing, how politicians cope with these different requirements and how skilful they are in these efforts, it is possible to elaborate the comparable success of actors when trying to make their propositions interactively salient, or in extreme cases even to affirm something like local rhetoric dominance. But we do not attempt to develop something like a 'veridical' reading, when we analyse the TV-discussions very close to the data. The aim is rather to capture the main framings of the political actors as a complex picture of argumentative and rhetorical elements they build on, and to describe them as semantic connections and connotations of a certain salience. We try to retain the basically polysemic nature of whatever the political actors present as their own interpretations and framings.

The two steps, analysing the TV discussions on the one side, and the reception materials on the other, each in their own right, are only preparatory work for the following main step: To analyse which aspects of the different discussants' discursive propositions and rhetorical strategies are ratified by which audiences, and what it is in detail that influences the alignment of their interpretive frames.

For assembling such a complex picture we make use of a computer-software for qualitative research, 'Atlas-ti'. All discursive propositions, framings and sub-framings of the discussing politicians and from the journalistic report shown before the discussion itself are compiled in a list of single propositions, which is structured as argumentative tree - or rather three bushes (for the two discussants and the journalistic report) with several ramified branches. These single propositions are then used as the 'codes' in our software. We code all sections, where audience members say something that fits these propositions - either affirmatively or denying - in the transcripts of the

reception group recordings. The coding of all references to propositions is just a heuristic tool for handling the extensive materials of four or five transcripts, which sometimes have up to 80 pages. It enables us subsequently to access all references to a certain proposition or group of propositions directly and very easily, in any usable combination. In this way we have all relevant sections ready for developing working hypotheses about any kind of patterns which may become visible, and are able to test and refine these hypotheses in the process of a cyclical Grounded Theory approach.

The patterns are mostly quite clear, specific audience groups mostly refer only to a small set of propositions from the TV-discussions, and the different audience groups from different social and political backgrounds are mostly quite distinct in what they pick and how they refer to it, although there is mostly also an intersection where all participants affirm (or oppose) certain propositions, independent of their political background.

We have worked up our already collected materials only to a small extent, so what I can present here are some first impressions from the first round of data-analysis.

One impression is that most references are cases of 'reframing', where alignment even of sub-frames are only partial, and this even when recipients affirm propositions of politicians they sympathise with. Positive, affirmative references mostly take the form of frame resonance, where participants enunciate their own, pre-existing 'social knowledge' when referring to discursive propositions from the TV-discussion they take up as close-to-experience accounts of what is going on. Up until now we have not found cases of affirmative reference *without* this resonance of underlying socio-political knowledge, but the interesting thing is always, *which* part of a discursive proposition it is, which resonates. In the details of how references are formulated by audience members, and on which segment of a proposition they hook up, we find clues to their quality. Of course this takes another effort of very close analysis, reconsidering also the local context of utterances, and drawing a bigger picture of the particular selection of propositions which are endorsed or rejected. In this bigger picture we can elaborate something like an inner coherence, when relating the participant's reframing of the politicians frames to their overall views on the debate and on politics in general.

Accordingly, it enables us to make *verifiable* statements about how certain propositions and frames become acceptable to certain audience members.

To demonstrate the benefits of such insights I want to give an example.

Audiences Reframing of a Heteroglot Discursive Proposition

The example I want to sketch indicates the role of socioculturally specific modes of reception in audiences' selective processing of competing interpretations in public discourse. It also indicates the dangers politicians face when using heteroglot rhetoric, a problematic which results from different stocks of common sense knowledge involved in these different modes of reception.

The televised political discussion we used in this round of data-collection was a recent debate between Martin Graf from the populist right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), and the leader of the Green Party, Eva Glawischnig. Graf is also Deputy President of the Austrian Parliament and had been widely criticised from the very beginning, when his party nominated him for this high representative office, because he is also active member of a far right student's league. Last year he wrote an article in the party journal of the Freedom Party, where he fiercely attacked one of his critics, the leader of the Jewish Cultural Community (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde) Ariel Muzicant, naming him 'mentor of anti-Fascist left terrorism'.

When opening the live-discussion Graf tried to justify his attacks as act of self-defence, accusing the Jewish representative to foster a political campaign against the Freedom Party by denouncing members of a “democratically elected party” to be Nazis. To back up his interpretation Graf quoted that Muzicant had not only wrongfully accused members of his own party, but also had compared a minister of the conservative People’s Party (ÖVP) with a leading figure of the 3rd Reich. The strategic selection of facts in this framing of the affair as ‘political campaign of the left’ systematically veiled that Graf had been criticised by all other parties, even the conservatives, and even high representatives of the catholic church.

In her reply Green leader Eva Glawischnig enters the discussion by addressing Graf directly:

Transcr. 1: Graf-Glawischnig ZiB 27.5.2009, lines 93-104

Glaw: .hh What I cannot comprehend is that you are not the public relations officer or party secretary or propaganda minister of the FPÖ, you are Deputy President of the Austrian Parliament! .hh And your first utterance again proves *very* clearly that you obviously are unable to differentiate. You are sitting in one of the highest (.) offices of the state, representing the parliament, even the Republic of Austria, and you talk exclusively about *that* - how poor is the FPÖ. I think when Mister Kickl is attacked, he can defend himself, he is party secretary of the FPÖ, and one doesn’t necessarily need to share political evaluations of Mister Muzicant .h however, that you as Deputy President of the Parliament just go and - with *such utterances* damage the reputation not only of the parliament but of the whole Republic of *Austria*, you obviously have not *realized* this up until now! And that is the charge and the big topic what all this is about!

Here we have Glawischnig’s main framing of the affair: that Graf’s conduct is incompatible with his representative office and damage to the reputation of the parliament. What is peculiar in this framing is the way she concentrates her critique on the rather patriotic argument of a damage for Austria, and that she substantiates her claim by criticising that Graf was acting according to party interests in a public office (where he rather should represent the institution in a neutral way). Damaging the reputation of an office would not necessarily be the kind of argumentation one would expect from a liberal left Green politician when criticising what is wrong with Graf’s attacks on the Jewish representative. The attack itself is only loosely referred to as “*such utterances*”. We can say that this creates something like a gap, an empty space in her main framing, where the political aspect is noticeable missing. From what we know about how frames are elicited, the opening statements of a talk are very important for giving a provisional orientation to what all the talking will lead to. But the important political evaluation of Graf’s attack is missing in her frame opening, even more that she does not explicate what is the “damage to the reputation of ... Austria” which she refers to. Only later in the discussion she gives more hints to that. There she explains further that Graf’s conduct does not adhere to the “fundamental consensus of the Austrian Republic”, namely the consensus to show some “sensibility for a religious community” which had suffered from murder and expulsion “in the years 38 to 45” (GG 27.5.09, 149-155, she avoids the words ‘Jewish’ and ‘3rd Reich’ or ‘National Socialism’). And only with quite implicit remarks towards the end of the discussion she mentions Graf’s far right ideological background and that the Freedom Party “plays with anti-Semitic resentments”, both remarks of quite low salience.

Obviously Glawischnig avoids formulating her main frame as the expectable left-liberal argument, that Graf deliberately and provocatively attacks the Jewish representative for ideological purposes, in order to satisfy his far right clientele. But Glawischnig also has a good reason to do so, because it

could fit the counter-framing of Graf, who claimed always being wrongfully accused to be a ‘Nazi’. The political right even has created a distinct term for that counter-framing, ‘Nazikeule’, claiming that the left always would break up political discussions unfairly by beating their opponents with the ‘Nazi-stick’. This counter-framing is used quite widely among conservatives. So when Glawischnig frames her argument differently she attempts to evade this specific recognizability of her argument.

Framing her account of the current affair in a rather patriotic way is a strategy to make it likely to be accepted by a majority, and we can say - with partial success, at least in her smaller sub-framing: All our five reception groups see Graf’s unduly partisan and provocative conduct as incompatible with his representative office, which means that we have examples of audiences from left liberal, social-democrat to conservative right, and even open sympathisers for the Freedom Party which approve Glawischnig’s sub-frame. And we can say that Glawischnig’s framing to a certain degree is heteroglot, drawing on a discursive and political repertoire which to a great extent is not her own. How a conservative audience group handles this heteroglot patriotism in her main framing “damage to the reputation of ... Austria” gives a quite intriguing picture.

The group is a family with an adult son from the traditionally conservative region of Tyrol, all regular voters for the conservative People’s Party (ÖVP). From the very beginning they talk about the character of the Freedom Party.

Transcr. 2: Familie Wobei 3.6.2009, lines 76-86

Fra: Yes what (.) always appears to me .hh (.) is that they (2) ya dispense such such sayings or such slogans to amm appear in the media (0.6) to fathom what they get away with and what not. (1) and aah s/ then everybody is upbraiding against it but, so really a result (0.8) mm consequences are not there.

(0.5)

Ste: .hh Yes, while, a deputy president of the parliament shouldn’t take the liberty to, [do] this.

Fra: [No!] He should be neutral, isn’t it?

The father Franz (Fra) opens with his evaluation of Graf’s conduct as deliberate provocation, explaining by relating it to a common, habitual strategy of the Freedom Party: To disperse provocative statements in order to gain the attention of the media. In his short description of the habitual discursive manoeuvre it looks as if he had a quite elaborated analytical view of how hegemonial discursive strategies work in the politics of meaning. How he describes this political game, reveals an important strategy of the Freedom Party (Gotsbachner 2003), the provocation, the reaction of the others and their results: It is about expanding what is sayable in public debate. In fact Franz and his family have a quite critical stance towards the FPÖ, seeing it as a party with a radical right ideology, which agitates against minorities and foreigners (Wobei, 466-516). From the way it is formulated we can see that this is part of the family’s political common-sense-knowledge which they bring in, and not taken from Glawischnig’s rather backgrounded allusions.

The son Stefan (Ste) then adds to his father’s general characterisation of the FPÖ, connecting it back to the TV-discussion itself: Graf shouldn’t act like this in a representative office. He thereby ratifies Glawischnig’s framing, and his father joins in to this acknowledgement by filling in the proper details to the frame (“neutral”). Stefan then goes on, still referring to Glawischnig’s framing, but on the higher level of “damage to the reputation of ... Austria”.

Transcr. 3: Familie Wobei 3.6.2009, lines 85-95

- Fra: [No!] He
should be neutral, isn't it?
- Ste: 'Cause, you have seen how the media all over Europe, (.) .hh aah naturally have scrambled around it and again this was a hook for them.
- Mag: They're waiting once [again, that something] extraordinary happens, [no?]
- Ste: [.hhh yes] [aah and- and aa-
and] especially this party, they should be extra sensitive, simply, and this they are not and
aah he especially, in his position (.) .hh ah should- be very careful with (.) such utterances.

The direct adoption of key words from Glawischnig's propositions ("Graf lacks sensibility"; "such utterances") is an indication that Stefan refers to her main frame. But what he and his mother Magda (Mag) make of it is only to some degree a ratification of her original argument 'Graf's conduct is damage to the reputation of Austria'. They agree with Glawischnig in the point that Graf was wrong and should be more careful, especially as high representative of the parliament. On the other side they completely reframe Glawischnig's main framing in the question of what exactly it is that causes the damage, and who is responsible for it. Stefan and Magda's formulations indicate that for them the damage for Austria originates from what the European media *make* of this affair, that for the foreign press this affair is only a "hook", an occasion eagerly awaited, which reinforces their prejudiced views about Austria ("And then its already enough for them for a long time.").

Strangely enough this representation brings in attributions which are very close to Graf's framing: That the 'foreign press' would be eager to denunciate Austria as a country of persistent 'Nazis' is, what Stefan, Magda and Franz, who later elaborates this topic further, actually mean. And this is also a common framing which is part of a socially stabilized and available discourse, the 'Nazi-stick'-discourse. Graf's framing essentially draws on this discourse when he paints himself as a victim of unfounded accusations which try to allocate him politically to the right wing corner (GG 27.5.09, 85-90 Graf: "Mister Muzicant had permanently called us anti-Semites, which we are obviously not, has called us right extremists has called us deniers of the Holocaust, which gather around us and all that ... and it is time to rectify all of this"). Certainly this framing is not acceptable to our reception group 'Familie Wobei' - they see it as evident that the Freedom Party is also political home to many from the extreme right (Wobei, 489-516). But Graf's argumentation resonates with their political common-sense-knowledge that unjustified accusations of being 'Nazis' are commonly waged against Austrians. In this point Franz ratifies Graf's critique that Muzicant made unjustified accusations (Wobei, 111-113; 145-7) and they agree that also Muzicant should be "more sensitive", not only Graf (Wobei, 1178-81).

There are a lot of questions in how our audience group amalgamates these contradictory framings - for instance what they see as undue in Muzicant's critique when they actually confirm its main point - and most of these questions we think can be solved from what can be reconstructed as the groups' overall understanding of politics. But what is more important here is the general conclusion of what we can learn from this example.

Conclusions

The intriguing thing about this audience groups' selective processing of the abundant competing interpretations in public discourse is their mode of reframing propositions from opposing political camps, where they ratify Glawischnig's patriotic frame of a 'damage to Austria', but make

something very different from it. Here we can see the importance of framing, because their 'constructive misunderstanding' is triggered partially by the circumstance that Glawischnig tries to frame her argument in a mainstream manner, patriotic rather than left liberal, triggering unexpected effects. Although Glawischnig carefully tried to avoid being framed in the 'Nazi-stick'-discourse, by leaving an empty argumentative space, a gap in her heteroglot frame, she opened an opportunity which eventually resulted in having it sneaking in through the back door. The empty space is the point where the conservative audience group started to fill in their own knowledge, and they do so by using parts of the framing of Glawischnig's opponent, Graf.

The example illustrates also one of the big advantages of our methodology, being able to show empirically what it is that makes certain framings and propositions acceptable to certain audiences when they resonate with certain sets of common sense knowledge from their discursive repertoires. Resonance is verifiable in how sometimes only implicitly indicated meanings from the politicians representations are filled up accordingly, and insinuations mobilize according sets of common sense knowledge. To make this resonance visible needs a quite refined qualitative methodology, data considerably collected to mirror the participant's discursive repertoires and a method of Discourse Analysis orienting to the fine details in the constitution of meaning.

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