

The Dynamic Use of Cognitive Frames

Unpublished notes by Robert Bascom, 2005

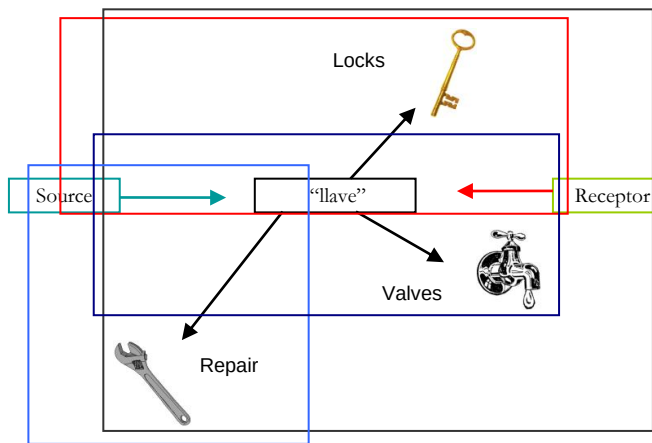
The term “frame” is essentially a static concept. It implies both external boundaries and internal structure with reference to architectural imagery. It is these very properties which make the metaphor so useful in communication. Frames help communicators disambiguate between competing references. Thus in Spanish “llave” can mean key, wrench, or valve/faucet (in English), depending on the frame which is applied (locks, repairs, access to water/liquid/gas). In turn English “key” can mean key to a lock; a piano or computer key; or a key to a map, code, musical score, or problem, depending on the frame which is applied (locks, keyboards, explanatory material). And to express these different frames in Spanish requires three different terms: llave (locks), tecla (piano/computer), and clave (map, code, musical score, problem).

This mismatch in terminology is due to the fact that Spanish applies different frames than does English to the world of experience. All the uses of “llave” in Spanish involve a turning motion in order to access something. “Tecla” refers to a pushing or tapping motion for access, and “clave” does not involve a physical motion at all, but access only. The other frames which distinguish one reference from another within these physical/non-physical access frames are sub-categories of this general three-part distinction or frame network. In English, “key” has to be distinguished in its various references through the frames of all the various specific uses directly, since English makes no “intermediary” or “networked” distinctions as are made in Spanish.

Frames can be used as well as make connections between explicit signs to other internal references within an established frame (for connotative richness) as well as connections to external connections between frames (for intentional ambiguity). Thus “night” not only can refer to a time of day (“the dinner meeting was held at eight o’clock at night”) but also can have other connotative and emotive associations (“that abandoned house is spooky at night”, “the moon reflected on the lake is very romantic at night”) which are easily accessed radially within the frame “night” (see below further on “night”).

And word-plays (e.g. puns) are usually built on connections between different frames using the same or a similar oral or textual form. Thus a political commentator has titled her book on President George W. Bush “Shrub”, taking the name frame and networking it with the biological frame, and placing the combined reference within the larger frame of political satire.

But the use of frames is a dynamic and negotiated process, one which the participants in communication events are making and fine-tuning dozens of decisions about which frames to apply in the space of just a few seconds. Thus the case of “llave” outlined above can be illustrated by the diagram below. One can see the three possible source-generated frames for “llave” (locks, repair, and valves), from which the receptors will have to quickly choose and adjust their frame(s) for understanding. This process is fairly straightforward in this example, as both real-world contexts and surrounding linguistic contexts will tend to quickly disambiguate the possible frames to be applied.



Furthermore, even though at a micro-level one can talk of the application of a single frame for disambiguation, for example, very quickly these frames stack up on one another, and of course multiple frames are accessed simultaneously either on purpose or by accident when word-play or simple ambiguity is involved.

And multiple frames can be applied in an overlapping way to specify something which could not exist otherwise. For example, we can consider the following sentence:

 The ringing of the phone woke me up in the middle of the night. In fact, it was two o'clock in the morning!

The simultaneous use of the a.m./p.m. frame with "night" frame results in a *morning* which is still *night*. This would doubtless seem as strange to someone unfamiliar with these systems as does the ancient Israelite notion that a *day* begins in the *evening* to those outside that cultural framework. Further, the entire set of usages associated with time of day would have to be seriously reworked in cultures unacquainted with timepieces.

Katan (1999) has described culture itself is not simply a static frame, context or background against which linguistic expression must be understood. "Culture here is viewed as a dynamic process, constantly being negotiated by those involved" (p. 21). Linguists have long been used to the idea that words and their referents are matters negotiated by speakers within a given cultural frame. But students of culture are now saying the same thing about the frames themselves, and including linguistic expression itself as part of the activity of framing. This approach places culture (understood dynamically) at the center of any understanding of language and, thus, translation.

According to Katan (and those he cites), much of the cultural framework needed for understanding even everyday linguistic expressions is influenced by how humans tend to process sensory input. Research stemming from Gestalt theory indicates that frames and signs (including linguistic signs) interact dynamically in the creation of communication events. Signs evoke frames ("Ladies and gentlemen" signals a formal beginning to a public event), and frames are tried out provisionally (Is it a joke? Is he serious?) to interpret emerging signs. These processes take place very rapidly in communication, with incomplete data constantly being processed on the sensory side, and provisional frames constantly being constructed, discarded, and replaced on the cognitive side: "...sensory signals are encouraged to fit preconceptions, and our general strategy is to use the information gained from the sensory system as a cue for representation, rather than as the representation itself" (p. 91).

In a section of his book which he titles "Shifting Frames: Translation and Mediation in Theory and Practice",

Katan takes up the problem of cross-cultural translation directly, arguing that the notion of frames and framing (pp. 123-125) leads not only to an understanding of translation that moves beyond the “particularly influential” model of Nida and Taber (p. 123) but also to an understanding of the translator as a cultural mediator:

... an essential difference between a traditional translator and a mediator is the mediator’s ability to understand and create frames. The mediator will be able to understand the frames of interpretation in the source culture and will be able to produce a text which would create a similar set of interpretation frames to be accessed in the target reader’s mind. (p. 125)
