

Framing the News Media in Germany?

Background and Linguistic Analyses of a Manual for the General Public Broadcasting Services in Germany (ARD)¹

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Abstract

This contribution discusses the ARD Framing Manual from 2016, “expert advice” by a German “renowned linguist” from the “Berkeley International Framing Institute”. It provides the background to the Manual and traces the public debate in the German media (in translation). It argues that awareness raising of “negative” frames is important, but concrete language alternatives of “positive” frames may be more difficult. A brief corpus-linguistic analysis illustrates the specific style of the Manual and discusses the concrete and constructive application of cognitive linguistic framing concepts to the language in the German public broadcasting system. What is more, the general idea of linking public communication to moral superiority is academically misleading (“selling conceptual brainwashing as cognitive science”) and the few concrete examples contained in the Manual appendix are too elementary or too controversial (“our free broadcasting ARD” vs. “media capitalist locusts”, in DeepL translation). But the ARD Framing Manual is a good starting point for discussion as it may be seen as an example of framing itself.

Keywords: framing, cognitive linguistics, broadcasting, journalistic writing, media criticism

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Manual

A Manual by Elisabeth Wehling was leaked by Netzpolitik in February 2019. It revealed that the MDR (“Middle German Broadcasting Services”, at the time presiding the ARD = “General [Public] Broadcasting Services in Germany”) had spent 90,000 € (120,000 € with “follow-up workshops”) on “expert advice”. The ARD apparently wanted to present themselves in a favourable light after public criticism by “critical” protesters or “concerned” citizens, calling the German public media “Staatsfunk” (state broadcasting), “Lügenpresse” (lying press), etc.

¹ I wish to thank my partners in the project, esp. Marina Ivanova for some very useful discussions and comments. The translation of the German original texts was made using DeepL.com, which is usually surprisingly reliable today in terms of natural English; only few adaptations were necessary to make the English version simple and straightforward, but the original “framing style” was left as suggested by the “unframed” machine – as translator-sceptics may think that only computers can translate objectively.

The result is the “ARD Framing Manual” by the Berkeley International Framing Institute, which is effectively one person, Elisabeth Wehling; it is listed here under Manual (2016). Despite the high price, this Manual came across as a popular introduction to frame theory with a few illustrative examples from the German media discourse at the time. It even suggests pre-fabricated phrases to be used in discussion, since only constant repetition of new patterns over time activates the new frames and thus the new “realistic” perception desired by the ARD (ibid: 17).

1.2. Concepts of Framing

Concepts of framing are used to analyse how people understand situations and activities, looking at images, stereotypes, metaphors, actors, context factors in the widest sense (cf. Fig. 1 below). The basic concept is generally attributed to Erving Goffman (1974), but it is used in many disciplines today, from traditional architecture to modern www construction. In the social sciences, Tversky and Kahneman (2011) have shown that framing plays an important role in decision making – quite in contrast to classical “rational” choice theory. The context or framing of problems results in part from extrinsic manipulation of the decision-options offered, as well as from forces intrinsic to decision-makers, e.g. their norms, habits, cultural expectations, etc. The most famous examples from Tversky & Kahneman (1981) or the international bestseller by the Nobel Prize winner Kahneman (2011) can be found everywhere on the internet:

Framing is the context in which choices are presented. Experiment: subjects were asked whether they would opt for surgery if the “survival” rate is 90 percent, while others were told that the mortality rate is 10 percent. The first framing increased acceptance, even though the situation was no different.

(Thinking, Fast and Slow 2019)



Figure 1: Cartoon illustrating different frames of the same event by different media

In media and politics, framing has first made popular in the paper “Metaphor and war: The metaphor system used to justify war in the Gulf” published in the middle of the first Gulf war (1991), where George Lakoff argues that the American involvement was “spun” by the strong metaphors used by the first Bush administration. It became both famous and infamous through Tony Blair’s New Labour spin doctors and George W. Bush’s War on Terror after 9/11 (see e.g. J. A. Kuypers’ *Bush’s War: Media Bias and Justifications for War in a Terrorist Age.*). The role framing plays in the effects of media presentation has been widely discussed (e.g. Matthes 2014), especially in the context of associated perceptions of how information is set in a fitting “frame of mind”. Sometimes it has been discussed in the context of fake news, but from a linguistic perspective this is a different focus (cf. Schmied & van der Bom eds. 2017 and Barclay 2018).

In sociolinguistics, Tannen (ed. 1993) has demonstrated how discourses are framed in a wide area of domains from medical examinations to sports and genres from intercultural group discussions to interviews. In cognitive linguistics, the “gold standard” are still the publications by George Lakoff (with M. Johnson 1980 and 1999).

2. Publishing and Media Contexts of the ARD Framing Manual

2.1. Politisches Framing as a Successful Popular Textbook

The academic reputation of the author of the ARD Framing Manual (2016) is based not only on her PhD dissertation at the University of California at Berkeley from 2013, but also on her joint publications with the doyen of linguistic framing, George Lakoff, *Auf leisen Sohlen ins Gehirn. Politische Sprache und ihre heimliche Macht* (2008) and *The Little Blue Book – The Essential Guide to Thinking and Talking Democratic* (2012). Based on the success of these publications, Wehling published her own popular textbook in German, based on German examples, for a German readership. This book from 2016 is entitled *Politisches Framing. Wie eine Nation sich ihr Denken einredet – und daraus Politik macht* (Political framing. How a nation persuades itself to think – and makes politics out of it). It contains a surprising variety of positive statements (“a must read”, “excellent”, “fascinating” (twice), “seminal work”, “fulminant plea for the revitalisation of our political language”). The director of the Berlin Studio of the well-known German Journal *Wirtschaftswoche* as well as a professor for neuro-cognitive linguistics from RWTH Aachen recommend it, as also do the whip of the Bündnis90/Die Grünen in the German Bundestag and a former EU commissioner from Austria. This shows the book has been received really positively by not only renowned academic and journalistic leaders but also political practitioners. Other recommendations from journalistic and academic circles can be found at the beginning of the book, which has also received some good reviews in the German press. Since it is written in a handy format and fluent style, it is not surprising that the book can be seen as a readable, popular introduction to a relatively new academic field. The style used throughout the book is, however, not academic and the metaphors are often striking, as would be

expected from a book that uses exactly the strategy it describes. The author herself summarises in the concluding chapter (Wehling 2016: 191f):

Democracy also Means Understanding Values and Implementing them Linguistically

I have already emphasized in the introduction that frames have an ideologically selective character. They evaluate and interpret social and political conditions from a certain world view. And once they are activated through language in our minds, they guide our thinking and action - mostly without us noticing. Democracy therefore always also means understanding values and translating them into language.

Those who neglect in political debates to make facts comprehensible in such frames that correspond to their world view create an ideological vacuum: their own political interpretation of the facts is not translated linguistically - and thus increasingly falls into oblivion or is not even clarified. And those who also use the frames of their political opponents propagate their view of the world in a highly effective way. Because linguistic repetition of frames - regardless of whether they are answered in the negative or in the affirmative - strengthens them in our minds and increasingly turns them into social and political common sense.

I have done two things in this book. In Part I, I introduced the basics of political framing. In Part II, I analysed central German-language policy debates in a cognitive-linguistic way. I have dealt with many core concepts that are used across the entire political spectrum - and also those concepts that activate frames that conceal or misrepresent undisputed facts or are directly in contrast to our democratic Common Sense, as it is presented in laws, for example.

The terms I have analysed do not exhaustively depict the linguistic images of our public discourses. But they should be known to everyone as firmly established or increasingly established terms. And thus, they should make us think - maybe because of their use across political camps in places where we expect ideological diversity, or maybe because of their use across society in places where they contradict political facts or even our norms and laws.

(Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator, 16/09/19)

From a (German) linguistic point of view, the book contains some neat examples from the political discourses current in 2016, such as in chapter 11 (Wehling 2016: 167-179) entitled “No place for sick passengers: in-migration and asylum” with interesting sections on well-known metaphors like “The boat is full”, “The nation as a vessel and resources as space”, “On masses of water”, and “On in-migrants as *Fremdkörper*, i.e. foreign bodies (particles, matter, substance)”. Sometimes these metaphors are less easy to translate than one would think, given their universal character. For the conscious German reader, this has a high recognition effect and is potentially greatly awareness raising, an aspect strongly emphasised by the author, who regularly stresses that such frames have great effect on the citizens’ cognition even if they are not aware of it.

2.2. Public Debate of the Manual

The public debate on the “ARD Framing Manual” in broadcasting and newspapers has been very controversial and mainly shattering. The following summary from

the article “The confusion at the ARD seems to be great” by Norbert Frei (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* 01/03/19) illustrates the final “verdict”:

The ARD has been bashed heavily for its recent “framing” trick - quite rightly, but now also sufficiently. Whoever ordered and accepted the report two years ago: He or she should have to pay out of his or her own pocket for the more than dubious parade of banalities, in terms of both democratic policy and ethics. By the way, it can only have been someone for whom the German language and its syntax mean as little as punctuation and grammar, because the “Manual” from the ominous “Berkeley International Framing Institute”, which can now be read on the Internet, is a scandal.

Adapted from www.DeepL.com/Translator (16/09/19)

Four days later, the same newspaper published a selection of letters-to-the editor because of the heated debate “On the difficult handling of language” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* 04/03/19):

Rhetorische Mätzchen meiden / Avoid rhetorical flourishes

Of course, you can criticize the framing theory. The conclusion: “If one takes these theories seriously and thinks them through, they amount to the denial of civic equality and thus of the republican constitution,” seems to me completely exaggerated and not even rudimentarily proven in the essay. By the way, I think he misses the intention of the ARD “Manual”. It is not a question of restricting the freedom of expression or questioning the audience's ability to judge. Of course, rhetoric and polemics must be allowed in political disputes, no matter how tasteless and contemptuous they may be. In any case, they fall back on the speaker. In fact, if you like, you can counter or expose them just as polemically. Only: Public radio and serious press should not take part in the game, at least not in the news section. Journalists should abstain from rhetorical gossip and use metaphors only to the extent that they do not conceal or bend facts. Instead, it is their task to check polemical slogans for truthfulness and intention. No framing theory is needed. But it does not contradict it either. To open a new debate on political correctness with her seems to me to be wrong. This kind of alarmism only plays into the hands of those who really despise civic equality and the republican constitution.

“Cui bono” gilt schon immer / “Cui bono” has always been true

Anyone who even slightly wakes up and walks through the media landscape, follows politics (the “Good Day Care Law”) or advertising will not be able to avoid the daily manipulation attempts by framing. I consider it Elisabeth Wehling's merit to have pointed this out with simple examples. If the author goes on to explain that people are then divided into two classes, “a small group of knowledgeable people ..., and at best a semi-consciously twilight mass, which is determined by it” - I feel that this is a targeted fear scenario (caution! Framing!), in which I ask myself: “What is this about?” Fortunately, every human being can still form his own opinion, and the ancient Romans already knew this: by the simple question “Cui bono” - who benefits from it. So nobody is at the mercy of framing - you simply have to remain critical. A postscript to the topic: “What surprises me most is that the author only addresses a defence attempt of the ARD against negative framings from the right that I can understand - but these framings from the right are obviously in order.”

Adapted from www.DeepL.com/Translator (16/09/19)

At the same time, Elisabeth Wehling was given the opportunity in an interview to clarify a few of the questions raised in the debate (“Ich bin schockiert über die Vorwürfe” / “I'm shocked by the accusations”, published 26/02/19, *DIE ZEIT*, paper 28/02/19). She appeared *angespannt* (stressed) and emphasised that

“individual slogans” in this paper of almost 90 pages were only for internal discussion – and the honorarium of 120,000 € was not supposed to be discussed publicly. Unfortunately, it was impossible to understand this without the internal context, but she was not in a position to discuss internal debates with her customers publicly. The “defence” on her website <http://www.elisabethwehling.com/ard> also explains that the Manual included only ‘discussion material’; although the title “Manual” may suggest otherwise, she denies giving “recommendations” (and indeed the term *Empfehlungen* does not occur at all and *Vorschläge* only twice):

The topics and classifications regarding the mission and importance of the public service ARD were discussed in workshops (in my presence) by ARD employees and reflected accordingly in the final document. That is why there are also terms in it which are by no means to be regarded as recommendations.

Adapted from www.DeepL.com/Translator (16/09/19)

3. Linguistic Perspectives on the Manual

3.1. Language in and of the Manual

Irrespective of the public debate on politics and communication, which is more relevant in the national German contexts than the much wider EU context, it is interesting to analyse the general linguistic results and suggestions or recommendations. The basic idea in the Manual is:

Sprache ist das wirkvollste Instrument für die Mobilisierung von Mitbürgern, aufgrund einer einfachen Wahrheit: Sprache aktiviert Frames. (10)

[Language is the most effective instrument for mobilizing fellow citizens, based on a simple truth: language activates frames.]

In her defence (above), the author emphasised the specific function of the manual, instructive for discussion, and this is reflected in the specific style: the Manual includes many informal oral phrases (such as *let's*) and even incomplete sentences. Generally, sentences are rather simple – if they are complex, then they have a clear *if – then (wenn – dann)* structure. Readers are addressed directly through questions and even more imperatives and 314 polite second person pronouns (*Sie = you*). Inclusive *we* occurs 139 times and *us/our (uns*)* 214 times on 89 pages. *Mitbürger* (“*co-citizens*”) is one of the most frequent nouns (29 times); unsurprisingly, the English loanword *frame/framing(s)* occurs 176 times and *moral* is the most frequent adjective (82 times) in the entire Manual. Another interesting usage is the intensifier *maximal(ly)*: “maximally honest, authentic and democratic” (p. 4), “maximally effective” (p. 4 and 7) and “Who wants to elicit maximal framing effects” (p. 81). Another central concept, *facts (Fakten)*, is also used frequently and some compounds (*Faktenlisten, Faktenblocks, Faktenargumente*) appear unusual – and arguably even naïve for internal discussion with professional media specialists.

These few corpus-linguistic examples clearly show that the Manual is not a scientific paper, although the introduction (22 pages) contains “the scientific basis of the framing method for communication” (*Manual* 6), not only in language processing,

but also in opinion formation and implicit decision-making processes (*Manual* 6). The section headlines indicate the argumentation: “Moral Framing”, “Frame Activating”, “Framing Effects”, “The Frame Negation Trap” (“if you negate a phrase, you still activate the frame”, *Manual* 16), “Hebbian Learning”, “Strategic Framing”, and finally the exclamation “Moral Framing is Important” (*Manual* 19). At this crucial point of discussion, the author anticipates two possible reactions and hesitations, either the new narratives, terms and slogans sound too strange and unfamiliar, even “aggressive”, or their use may be attacked as “politically correct” in the negative sense, “dogmatic”, “manipulative”, “brain washing” – and she is absolutely right.

The Manual has some appealing section headlines for the following four Parts: “Our Broadcasting Service”, “Freedom”, “Participation”, and “Reliability”. However, the practical linguistic value of the Manual seems to be minimal, as some key examples in the appendix may demonstrate (*Manual* 87):

1. Gemeinsamer Rundfunk statt Informationsanarchien
[Joint broadcasting instead of information anarchy]
2. Demokratie statt rechenschaftsfreier Echokammern
[Democracy instead of unaccountable echo chambers]

The examples cleverly pick up currently perceived threats like “information anarchy” and “echo chambers”, but they obviously cannot grasp the full complexity of the intellectual debate, because of the limitations of the genre “training manual”.

3.2. A Critical Discussion of Manual Suggestions

The following excerpt (Figure 2) from the Manual illustrates the suggestions or recommendations in the original German, but it also illustrates the metaphoric antonyms used – and may suggest some translation problems in this “crisp”, simple and often harsh, even provocative language. This may make it clear that it is much easier to raise awareness through deconstructing negative examples than by actively creating positive “alternatives” that come across as natural and convincing.

To discuss just a few of the phrases above: “Controlled democracy instead of everyone as he/she wants/pleases”) is problematic because “control” does not come across as positive to everyone or may even rather appeal to nationalist minds – and it remains unclear whether this is intended in this specific case; it should not be “moral framing” to those convinced of their “moral superiority” (cf. below). “Das Gute sehen” (“See the Good”?) and “The bright side”?) as a British English equivalent, related to Monty Python’s “Always look on the bright side of life”?) seems to be crisp and clear in German and render an optimistic world-view. The extremely old cliché “Brot und Spiele fürs Volk” (*bread and circuses*, from Latin *panem et circenses*) may come across as a tautology or as too “highbrow” in form and meaning (if Volk = people = *plebs*) to work at a general level. The slogan “Excellence instead of turnover” is as nicely anti-capitalist as “Democracy instead of turnover”, but are “concerned” or critical listeners and protesters really convinced that today’s public broadcasting system is “excellence” and “democracy”? this may

be counter-productive. The example “Profitfixierung” (“fixing profit”) does not sound natural and only becomes “alive” through the related, but crude “Profitmaximierung” (“maximising profit”). Of course, these examples occur only in the final “Hints for implementation” (Hinweise zur Umsetzung), but if the training or discussion group they are addressed to are professional media specialists, they may see these examples not as solutions, but rather as problems.

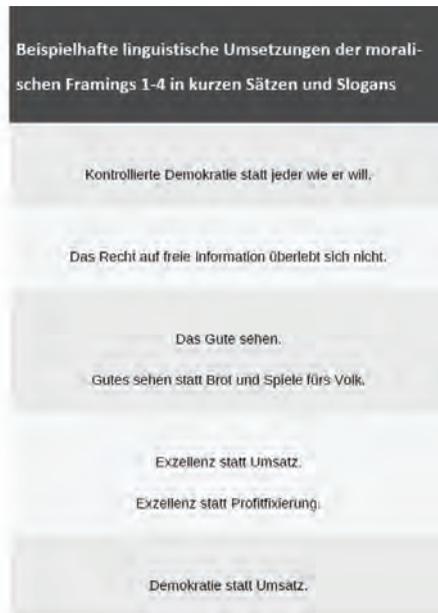


Figure 2: Some German examples from the ARD Framing Manual Appendix

4. Conclusion: Framing the “ARD Framing Manual”

For the purposes of our discussion on conflicting truths, the “case” of the “ARD Framing Manual” is interesting because it can be perceived in two perspectives:

On the one hand, the Manual can be seen as a case of clever framing, i.e. the conscious setting of interpretation perspectives, like the name “Berkeley Institute” suggests a direct link to the famous Californian university, on whose web pages the author is mentioned under alumni, not under teachers or researchers. It also implies more than a one-woman “institute”, whose other founding members have left, as Wehling explained during the ZEIT interview mentioned. Finally, it indicates much more research experience, as long as the “cancelled” project still

remained well visible on the “Institute’s” web pages. All these factors serve to construct high credibility in the readers’ cognition.

On the other hand, it has to be admitted that the author Elisabeth Wehling has a PhD from Berkeley from 2013, she has two joint publications with George Lakoff, the most famous linguist in the field, and she has some experience if we do not count only the three years after the PhD, but the ten years since she started her MA studies there.

These two perspectives can be seen conflicting truths and have to be in the light of the Manual context: the cognitive counter-strike to widespread public criticism of the public broadcasting system in Germany². As the brief linguistic analysis has shown (among other things), the most frequent adjective in the Manual is “moral”, but if this concept is so important to the German media professionals, the constant re-emphasis of the moral superiority of the new frames may even feel counter-productive. Manual readers may find it difficult to accept the training application formulated explicitly in the Manual (2016: 17), since it does not sound like a defensive re-adjustment, but like a recipe for brainwashing, as Wehling noticed herself (above):

Nur durch die ständige Wiederholung neuer sprachlicher Muster über längere Zeit hinweg ist es möglich, den neuen Frames kognitiv Geltung zu verschaffen und sie damit zu einer realistischen Wahrnehmungsalternative werden zu lassen.

Only through the constant repetition of new linguistic patterns over a long period of time is it possible to give the new frames cognitive validity and thus make them a realistic alternative of perception.

(From www.DeepL.com/Translator, 16/09/19)

We may conclude that the great public debate on the Manual in Germany has had at least two interesting effects: on the positive side, it has made many more readers aware of the “framing” of news and the underlying problems of “truthful” media language in democratic and participatory political systems. On the negative side, it may have contributed to the “alienation” of large parts of the German public and even parties from the “public”, “independent” media, especially the broadcasting system. As often occurs, the first impulse and interpretation may be based on the “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers” that are so prominent in the current (social media) news consumption of news recipients. However, critical awareness of “conflicting truths”³ and extent to which they are triggered by language usage in many different genres and media may be a necessary frame for all political discourse, not only in Germany, but also in other European countries where similar discussions are a matter of importance.

² Such media scepticism and media criticism is, of course, wide-spread and popular (or populist?) in many countries and among many political groups, from Trump’s America and Johnson’s Britain (the frames discussed here are clearly used in the recent new attack on the status and financing of the BBC) to the current situation of media discussed in South Eastern Europe, especially in Serbia (cf. Blagojevic 2018 and Đorđević 2018) and (Northern) Macedonia (cf. Kostadinovska-Stojchevska 2017).

³ The debate about the Framing Manual is not the only discourse in and on the German public media. At the same time (29/03/19) in the same channel, some self-critical discussions asked for instance: “Can journalists report objectively?” <https://tinyurl.com/ya9l8bv3> (05/12/19) and concluded that the current (constructivist) view is that media do not reflect reality, but are significantly involved in the construction of reality and that “Transparency is the new objectivity”, which is probably more in line with a desirable media ethos today than the new positive frame attempt in the Manual.

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