

## Explain yourself: George Lakoff, cognitive linguist

As part of our research on explanatory journalism, we're interviewing experts in fields outside journalism about their approaches to explaining complex systems to non-specialists.



Our first expert is cognitive linguist [George Lakoff](#), who did groundbreaking research on the [embodiment of thought and language](#) and the way people think using [metaphors](#). For Lakoff, language is not a neutral system of communication, because it is always based on frames, conceptual metaphors, narratives, and emotions. Political thought and language is inherently moral and emotional. The basic phrases journalists use every day—words like “liberty” “freedom” “immigrant” “taxes”— are *essentially contested concepts* that have radically different meanings for different Americans.

Lakoff came up with a widely influential framework for understanding American politics, contrasting the [“strict father” morality of conservatives](#) with the [“nurturant parent” morality of liberals](#). He has lectured to Democratic Party caucuses and retreats about politics and language, strategized with Howard Dean during his [presidential bid](#), and helped [found a think tank](#) to help progressives develop sophisticated uses of language and conceptual framing to match that the conservative movement has perfected — with a difference, namely, using only truths and moral beliefs liberals really hold.

What good explanatory journalism needs to do, Lakoff suggests, is decode the moral frameworks within the language of politics and policy. Lakoff spent two hours in his Berkeley office discussing how to apply the findings of his research to covering politics and policy, and later elaborated on some of his thoughts and quotes over e-mail. **His ideas included ditching current conceptions of “objectivity,” “balance,” and “the center,” putting more effort into decoding the metaphors that politicians use, teaching journalism school students cognitive science, and creating an online dictionary of the real meanings of words.**

### **Journalists Have an Outdated Conception of ‘Reason’**

The first step, Lakoff says, is for journalists to give up their outdated ideas of [Enlightenment reason](#) and embrace the way people really reason — Real Rationality —

coming new understandings of the brain—something that up-to-date marketers have already done. Enlightenment reason, we now know, was a false theory of rationality.

“Most thought is unconscious. It doesn’t work by mathematical logic. You can’t reason directly about the world—because you can only conceptual what your brain and body allow, and because ideas are structured using frames.” Lakoff says. “As [Charles Fillmore](#) has shown, all words are defined in terms of conceptual frames, not in terms of some putative objective, mind-free world.”

“People really reason using the logic of frames, metaphors, and narratives, and real decision making requires emotion, as [Antonio Damasio](#) showed in *Descartes’ Error*.”

“A lot of reason does not serve self interest, but is rather about empathizing with and connecting to others.”

### **People Don’t Decide Using ‘Just the Facts’**

Contemporary explanatory journalism, in particular, is prone to the false belief that if the facts are presented to people clearly enough, they will accept and act upon them, Lakoff says. **“In the ‘marketplace of ideas’ theory, that the best factually based logical argument will always win. But this doesn’t actually happen.”**

“Journalists always wonder, ‘We’ve reported on all the arguments, why do people vote wrong?’” Lakoff says. “They’ve missed the main event.”

Many journalists think that “framing” a story or issue is “just about choices of words and manipulation,” and that one can report factually and neutrally without framing. **But language itself isn’t neutral. If you study the way the brain processes language, Lakoff says, “every word is defined with respect to frames. You’re framing all the time.”** Morality and emotion are already embedded in the way people think and the way people perceive certain words—and most of this processing happens unconsciously. “You can only learn things that fit in with what your brain will allow,” Lakoff says.



Portrait of René Descartes by Frans Hals

A recent example? The unhappy phrase “public option.”

**“When you say public, it means ‘government’ to conservatives,” Lakoff explains. “When you say ‘option,’ it means two things: it’s not necessary, it’s just an ‘option,’ and secondly it’s a public policy term, a bureaucratic term. To conservatives, ‘public option’ means government bureaucracy, the very worst thing you could have named this. They could have called it the America Plan. They could have called it doctor-patient care.”**

According to Lakoff, because of the conservative success in shaping public discourse through their elaborate communication system, the most commonly used words often have been given a conservative meaning. “Tax relief,” for example, suggests that taxation is an affliction to be relieved.

### **Don’t Repeat the Language Politicians Use: Decode It**

Instead of simply adopting the language politicians use to frame an issue, Lakoff argues, **journalists need to analyze the language political figures use and explain the moral content of particular words and arguments.**

**That means, for example, not just quoting a politician about whether a certain policy infringes or supports American “liberty,” but explaining what he or she means by “liberty,” how this conception of liberty fits into the politician’s overall moral outlook, and how it contrasts with other conceptions of liberty.**

It also means spelling out the full implications of the metaphors politicians choose. In the recent coverage of health care reform, Lakoff says, one of the “hidden metaphors” that needed to be explored was whether politicians we’re talking about healthcare as a commodity or as a necessity and a right.

Back on the 2007 presidential campaign trail, Lakoff pointed out, Rudy Giuliani called Obama’s health care plans “socialist,” while he himself compared buying health care to buying a flatscreen tv set, using the metaphor of health care as a commodity, not a necessity. A few liberal bloggers were outraged, but several newspapers reported his use of the metaphor without comment or analysis, rather than



Republican politician, Rudy Giuliani. Picture: D:11 P:11

exploring what it revealed about Giuliani's <sup>DIRT RISE</sup> worldview.

Right now, Lakoff says, many media outlets only apply this kind of decoding to messages from their political opponents. **“Take Keith Olbermann.** He assumes a liberal moral view (as I do). He will then take a statement from Fox that fits conservative morality and violates liberal morality. He will be outraged, as he should given his (and my) moral views. **But he doesn't usually explain what the conservative moral position is and why Fox commentators would hold it. As a liberal commentator, that isn't seen as part of his job. His job is to comment from his taken-for-granted moral worldview. And he does it well.”**

### **A Dictionary of the Real Meanings of Words**

What would a nonpartisan explanatory journalism be like? To make nonpartisan decoding easier, Lakoff thinks **journalists should create an online dictionary of the different meanings of words—“ not just a glossary, but a little Wikipedia-like website,”** as he puts it. This site would have entries to explain the differences between the moral frameworks of conservatives and progressives, and what they each typically mean when they say words like “freedom.” Journalists across the country could link to the site whenever they sensed a contested word.

A project like this would generate plenty of resistance, Lakoff acknowledges. **“What that says is most people don't know what they think. That's extremely scary...the public doesn't want to be told, ‘You don't know what you think.’”** The fact is that **about 98 percent of thought is unconscious.”**

But, he says, people are also grateful when they're told what's really going on, and why political figures reason as they do. He would like to see a weekly column in the New York Times and other newspapers decoding language and framing, and analyzing what can and cannot be said politically, and he'd also like to see cognitive science and the study of framing added to journalism school curricula.

### **Ditch Objectivity, Balance, and ‘The Center ‘**

Lakoff has two further sets of advice for improving explanatory journalism. The first is to ditch journalism's emphasis on balance. Global warming and evolution are real. Unscientific views are not needed for “balance.”

**“The idea that truth is balanced, that objectivity is balanced, is just wrong,”** Lakoff says. Objectivity is a valuable ideal when it means unbiased reporting, Lakoff argues. But too often, the need for objectivity means that journalists hide their own judgments of an issue behind “public opinion.” The journalistic tradition of “always having to get a quote from somebody else” when the truth is obvious is foolish, Lakoff says.

So is the naïve reporting of poll data, since poll results can change drastically depending on the language and the framing of the questions. The framing of the questions should be part of reporting on polls.

Finally, Lakoff’s research suggests that **many Americans, perhaps 20 per cent, are “biconceptuals” who have both conservative and liberal moral systems in their brains, but apply them to different issues.** In some cases they can switch from one ideological position to another, based on the way an issue is framed. These biconceptuals occupy the territory that’s usually labeled “centrist.” **“There isn’t such a thing as ‘the center.’ There are just people who are conservative on some issues and liberal on others, with lots of variations occurring. Journalists accept the idea of a “center” with its own ideology, and that’s just not the case,”** he says.

Journalists tell “stories.” Those stories are often narratives framed from a particular moral or political perspective. Journalists need to be more upfront about the moral and political underpinnings of the stories they write and the angles they choose.

### **Journalism Isn’t Neutral—It’s Based on Empathy**

“Democracy is based on empathy, with people not just caring, but acting on that care—having social as well as personal responsibility...That’s a view that many journalists have. That’s the reason they become journalists rather than stockbrokers. They have a certain view of democracy. That’s why a lot of journalists are liberals. They actually care about how politics can hurt people, about the social causes of harm. That’s a really different view than the conservative view: if you get hurt and you haven’t taken personal responsibility, then you deserve to get hurt—as when you sign on to a mortgage you can’t pay. **Investigative journalism is very much an ethical enterprise, and I think journalists have to ask themselves, ‘What is the ethics behind the enterprise?’ and not be ashamed of it.”** Good investigative journalism uncovers real facts, but is done, and should be done, with a moral purpose.

To make a moral story look objective, **“journalists tend to pin moral reactions on**

other people: 'I'm going to find someone around here who thinks it's outrageous'... This can make outrageous moral action into a matter of public opinion rather than ethics."

In some ways, Lakoff's suggestions were in line with the kind of journalism that one of our partners, the non-profit investigative journalism outlet [ProPublica](#), already does. In its mission statement, [ProPublica](#), makes its commitment to "moral force" explicit. "Our work focuses exclusively on truly important stories, stories with 'moral force,'" the statement reads. "We do this by producing journalism that shines a light on exploitation of the weak by the strong and on the failures of those with power to vindicate the trust placed in them."

He emphasized the importance of doing follow-ups to investigative stories, rather than letting the public become jaded by a constant succession of outrages that flare on the front page and then disappear. Most of ProPublica's investigations are ongoing and continually updated on its site.

### 'Cognitive Explanation:' A Different Take on ProPublica's Mission

But Lakoff also had some very nontraditional suggestions about what it would mean for ProPublica to embark on a different kind of explanatory journalism project. "There are two different forms of explanatory journalism. One is material explanation — the kind of investigative reporting now done at ProPublica: who got paid what by whom, what actions resulted in harm, and so on. All crucial," he noted. "But equally crucial, and not done, is cognitive and communicative explanation."

"Cognitive explanation depends on what conceptual system lies behind political positions on issues and how the working of people's brains explains their political behavior. For example, since every word of political discourse evokes a frame and the moral system behind it, the superior conservative communication system reaches most Americans 24/7/365. **The more one hears conservative language and not liberal language, the more the brains of those listening get changed.** Conservative communication with an absence of liberal communication exerts political pressure on Democrats whose constituents hear conservative language all day every day. **Explanatory journalism should be reporting on the causal effects of conservative framing and the conservative communicative superiority.**"

"ProPublica seems not to be explicit about conflicting views of what constitutes 'moral

force.’ ProPublica does not seem to be covering **the biggest story in the country, the split over what constitutes morality in public policy**. Nor is it clear that ProPublica studies the details of framing that permeate public discourse. Instead, ProPublica assumes a view of “moral force” in deciding what to cover and how to cover it.

“For example, ProPublica has not covered **the difference in moral reasoning behind the conservative and progressive views on tax policy, health care, global warming and energy policy**, and so on for major issue after major issue.

“ProPublica also is not covering a **major problem in policy-making — the assumption of classical views of rationality and the ways they have been scientifically disproved in the cognitive and brain sciences**.

“ProPublica has not reported on the disparity between the conservative and liberal communication systems, nor has it covered the globalization of conservatism — the international exportation of American conservative strategists, framing, training, and communication networks.

**“When ProPublica uncovers facts about organ transplants and nursing qualifications, that’s fine. But where is ProPublica on the reasons for the schisms in our politics?** Explanatory journalism demands another level of understanding.

“ProPublica, for all its many virtues, has room for improvement, in much the same way as journalism in general — especially in *explanatory* journalism. Cognitive and communicative explanation must be added to material explanation.”

## **What Works In the Brain: Narrative & Metaphor**

As for creating explanatory journalism that resonates with the way people process information, Lakoff suggested two familiar tools: narrative and metaphor.

**The trick to finding the right metaphors for complicated systems, he said, is to figure out what metaphors the experts themselves use in the way they think.** “Complex policy is usually understood metaphorically by people in the field,” Lakoff says. What’s crucial is learning how to distinguish the useful frames from the distorting or overly-simplistic ones.

As for explaining policy, Lakoff says, **“the problem with this is that policy is made in a way that is not understandable...**Communication is always seen as last, as the tail

on the dog, whereas if you have a policy that people don't understand, you're going to lose. What's the point of trying to get support for a major health care reform if no one understands it?"

One of the central problems with policy, Lakoff says, is that **policy-makers tend to take their moral positions so much for granted that the policies they develop seem to them like the "merely practical" things to do.**

Journalists need to restore the real context of policy, Lakoff says, by trying "to get people in the government and policy-makers in the think tanks to understand and talk about what the moral basis of their policy is, and to do this in terms that are understandable."

*Interview by Lois Beckett*