

# A Frame Analysis for 2019 Trump's State of the Union Address

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## Abstract

Frame is an immediate or fixed mental structure, which is used by people for understanding and interpreting reality. Besides, the frame includes surface structure and deep structure. The surface structure is triggered by particular words or phrases, which include metaphorical surface structure and non-metaphorical surface structure; while the deep structure is deep values of people, which is triggered by surface structure. The State of the Union Address of the United States has evolved from an empty policy speech to a big lobbying campaign in which metaphors, images, and cultural stories are widely used as speech tools. Employing frame theory, this paper selects the State of the Union Address of Donald trump in 2019 as an object, starting with the three theses of his address, then describing the linguistic structure characteristics of the text, and finally pointing out Trump's discourse purpose, frame strategies, and ideological position.

## Keywords

The State of the Union Address; frame; surface structure; deep structure.

## 1. Introduction

Frame is an immediate or fixed cognitive psychological structure that is used to understand and construe the real world. Applying Frame Theory to the analysis of political discourse can explore the deep connotation of political discourse and help people understand political discourse correctly. "Trump tornado" is a hot word around the 2016 US presidential election candidate Trump. This huge "tornado" has brought great changes to the US political arena. "Trump discourse" has also become one of the hot spots for scholars to study American politics. The state of the Union address is a kind of state of the Union address. In the U.S. government, its main role is to clarify the domestic and foreign situations faced by the president of the United States every year, as well as the policy measures to be taken by the government. However, after hundreds of years of evolution, the role of the state of the Union address has not only been limited to the annual report, it has become a large "talk show" for leaders to propagandize political ideas. With the help of the Frame Theory, it will be the main content of this paper to describe Trump's language structure in his state of the Union address and analyze his discourse purpose, frame strategy, and ideology.

## 2. Frame Theory

Frame theory is mainly derived from the study of sociology and microcosmic cognitive psychology.

In the 1970s, Charles Fillmore introduced "Frame" into linguistics and developed Frame Semantics. According to Fillmore's definition, the framework is a specific, unified knowledge structure or a coordinated schematization of experience. Frame is similar to the concept network neural network. Its function is to provide a conceptual background for people to understand discourse. When a conversation involves a concept contained in any frame, it will activate other concepts within the frame. For example, the "business event" frame includes

the concepts of buyer, seller, money, goods, etc. But the words buy, sell, cost, spend and charge will activate different aspects of the "business event" framework, so they will also be expressed from different perspectives. Buy starts from the perspective of buyers and goods, while sell involves the conceptual background of sellers and goods.

Under the influence of Charles Fillmore, George Lakoff introduced the frame semantics into the political field in the early 21st century, and proposed the frame theory which combines the research results of cognitive linguistics and neurocognitive science. Lakoff (2004) explained the definition of frame through the dispute between the Conservative Party and the Republican Party. On the tax issue, the Conservative Party advocated tax reduction and proposed "tax relief", which took the tax as the source of people's pain. While the Democratic Party adopted the Republican frame and put forward its tax plan based on "tax relief". Lakoff called it "do not think about elephants". The Democratic Party made the mistake of using the other party's frame in the way of opposing the Republican Party, which would only make "tax is a disaster" more deeply rooted in the people's mind.

In addition, the frame includes surface structure and deep structure. The surface structure is triggered by particular words or phrases, which include metaphorical surface structure and non-metaphorical surface structure; while the deep structure is deep values of people, which is triggered by surface structure. Furthermore, the frame is closely related to metaphor. According to frame theory, people's thinking is carried out through frame and metaphor. If there is a mapping relationship between the two frames, then a metaphor is created. But people often do not realize the existence of metaphor.

### **3. Three Themes of State of the Union Address**

Political discourse carries the key elements and basic contents of ideology, while ideology reflects and expresses the thoughts of political subjects. As a kind of political discourse, the state of the Union speech has not only been limited to the annual report but also become a large "talk show" to promote certain political ideas. With the help of the frame theory, this paper analyzes three themes of Trump's speech to describe Trump's language structure, discourse purpose, frame strategy and ideology.

#### **3.1. Party Cooperation**

Trump mentioned "cooperation" frequently in this state of the Union speech. He said that the current politics is vengeful, vindictive and resistant and the United States should seek greatness, resolve differences. He firstly used a series of nouns "adventure, resistance, contribution" to describe modern politics. These words will lead to the "hatred frame" in which haters, people who are hated, disagreements, injuries, cooperation are all included. When the view conveyed by the speaker is consistent with the existing structure of the hearer, the hearer is easy to accept the ideas of the speaker. The words related to "hatred" activate surface frame, and then activate the deep moral concept. Such surface frame has a negative meaning, so it will lead to an aversion to the unpleasant consequences of partisan divisions, and the audience will turn to agree with Trump's cooperative thought. Trump then uses a series of metaphorical verbs, such as "bridge, heal, build, forge", these words will activate the destruction and injury frame. Because of the previous destruction, it needs reconstruction, because of the injury, it needs healing. After the activation of the negative surface frame chain to activate the deep frame, Trump continues to deepen people's hatred of Party division.

#### **3.2. Economic Policy**

Republican Party claims to maximize all wealth and military and political power, and tax reduction is one of its means. Trump employed "death tax" in his speech, which will activate the deep frame, that is to say, when a person dies, taxing people who are departed is often

seen as immoral or detrimental to the interests of the person. The deep moral values reactivate the Nor-epinephrine circuit which makes people feel unhappy. Therefore, the listener will also support the abolition of inheritance tax. Trump uses the "death frame" to make the audience unconsciously support his thoughts.

In the same way, Obama's new medical reform policy has been reframed by trump as "unpopular Obama individual mandatory penalty". From the perspective of surface frame analysis, "Obamacare individual mandate penalty" activated "punishment frame". Under this frame, people will think: paying medical insurance is equivalent to confiscating their property; there is no self-interest in paying the fine; the fine will only be paid if one breaks the law and does something wrong. From a deep perspective, the so-called "penalty" of health insurance violates the mainstream values of American—freedom, and it also damages personal interests. Therefore, from the perspective of the audience, the abolition of the "mandatory penalty" is equivalent to the abolition of the shackles, then Trump will get more understanding and support.

### 3.3. Illegal Immigration and Wall Building

One of Trump's purposes of seeking cooperation is to find a breakthrough for solving illegal immigration and building walls. For this purpose, Trump described a series of problems caused by illegal immigration and invited many victims to attend. When it comes to "illegal migration", "crime frame" is activated, which contains a series of contents such as the offender, the victim, the law and morality. In deep values, crime is shameless. Trump not only called these people "illegal immigrants", but also used "illegal alien" three times. Compared with the former, the latter is more exclusive. "Illegal alien" will activate the "alien frame". People have a relatively unified understanding of aliens: they are strange-looking, cold-blooded and aggressive vicious creatures. The most important thing is that they are not human beings. So it is great harm to the security of the United States to let aliens enter the United States.

As well as "alien frame", Trump also used "flood frame" to describe immigration in his speech. The two are all complex frame - disaster frame that includes both perpetrators and victims.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper mainly analyzes three topics in Trump's State of the Union address and finds four commonly used frames: hatred frame, punishment frame, death frame, and disaster frame. The strategy often used in the speech is to reframe, such as replacing "estate tax" with "death tax". Also, Trump often uses words with negative emotions. Some of these words are metaphorical expressions and some are non-metaphorical expressions, but they all activate negative surface frames, and then the surface frame reactivates the deep values. Furthermore, the speaker's structure will be influenced by his own and social moral values, so his choice of words and sentences is related to the deep values. Trump's purpose of using all these frames is to guide the audience to reason according to the Republican values and logic, control the direction of public opinion, to obtain public support, and pave the way for future decisions on politics, economy, national defense, and other aspects.

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