

Language in Discourse: What Racist Frameworks have to do with Language and Ourselves

By Stefan Fricke-Liebig
Linguist and expert in politics and law

In response to a growing number of racist attacks, the call for taking a decisive stance against racist language and behaviour is growing. How this could look specifically, is often not mentioned though. Partly because of a lack of precise action strategies, partly because of a lack of conceptual integration into a scientific theoretical framework. This text aims to place racist language in a psycho- and neuro-linguistic context, followed by recommendations for action.

The discussion in Berlin about the street name Mohrenstraße has gone on for some time already. The name, according to recurring arguments, is too offensive, too racist and too uncontemporary. Now Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG) is lending new impetus - at least in relation to the underground station of the same name. Apparently, it is to get a new name. The BVG wants to rename Mohrenstraße underground station into Glinkastraße underground station. However, it recently came to light that Glinka, the person lending the name, may have been anti-semitic. Out of the frying pan into the fire. Searching for **suitable names in an appropriate context** is a delicate matter - not only in Berlin. But what effect do such measures have? And can places we live in be made more democratic by changing linguistic frameworks, such as the renaming of public roads and squares? Can we change thought patterns in the long-term by changing language patterns?

Theories of Language and Thought

The hypothesis that differences in language may influence cognition was first adopted in the 19th century by Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt. In the 1930's, American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf established the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**. The scientists suspected that people, who spoke fundamentally differently also thought differently. In this context, not only different names for things, but also grammatical differences between languages were identified as the cause of cognitive differences. Since then, there have been numerous alternative views on the connection between language and thinking, causing the linguistic determinism of our thinking to increasingly disappear from linguistic discourse.

In times of populists and fake news, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which had already been classed as obsolete, is experiencing an unexpected renaissance. **'Language is never innocent'** is a much-quoted phrase by the philosopher Roland Barthes. In other words, if language is able to influence our thinking, it becomes a resource of power and can be abused as such. The linguistic and cognitive

scientist **Elisabeth Wehling** also¹ addressed this source of linguistic power, as well as the prevention of its abuse in her book *Political Framing*. According to Wehling, with language, the sovereignty of interpretation can be conquered in political, scientific, but also in private debates: what used to be plain wrong can suddenly seem right through firm assertion and eternal repetitions. **Language can be used to construct social reality**, such as inclusion (we are the good) and exclusion (you are the bad), the promotion or downgrading of individual groups, or the projection of opportunities, risks and threats. But it is not only in political discourse that language is used as a resource of power to - using the words of sociologist Max Weber - successfully assert one's own convictions against the interests of others. Politicians actively and purposefully manipulate people's attitudes and opinions to their own advantage through targeting or frames. The German political party *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*, for example, regularly defines xenophobic frames around the themes of crisis, refugees, Europe and national autonomy.

Above all, **racist language is and remains one of the biggest challenges** in this area — be it assailing refugees or devaluing people of different colour, religion, or political orientation.

In addition to political and societal representatives at federal, state and municipal level, socially engaged companies, such as Lingualife, are also responsible for positioning themselves in regard to such social deficits, as well as actively counteracting them. For the Lingualife team, this involves opposing racist language and racist behaviour with wholehearted determination. The question initially posing itself to the Lingualife team as a language service provider consisting of a team of linguists, political scientists and sociologists, was: **Where do we start specifically and how can engagement work successfully?**

Basically, it can be said that the only way to prevent linguistic manipulation and linguistic abuse is by becoming aware of the underlying linguistic patterns and strategies. **Language awareness** provides the necessary basic tool. But setting your own active **interpreting parameters (frames)** can also be an effective and proven tool. Both language tools will now be described in more detail below.

The Linguistic Level — About Language Awareness & Framing

LANGUAGE AWARENESS

Language awareness refers to the basic explicit knowledge of language and the conscious and experienced perception when using language. In the holistic approach to language, there are five *domains*, which together constitute language awareness²:

¹ Wehling, Elisabeth: *Political Framing*. Herbert von Harlem Verlag, 2016.

² Ten questions about language awareness. In: ELT Journal, Volume 57, Issue 3, July 2003, pp. 251—259.

1. The **cognitive domain**, which involves the development of awareness for patterns, contrasts, categories, rules and systems.
2. The **domain of performance**, which involves the development of awareness for the processing of language, but also the development of awareness for learning in general and language learning in particular.
3. The **affective domain**, which relates to the formation of attitudes, attention, curiosity, interest and aesthetic empathy.
4. The **social domain**, which involves developing an understanding for other languages, as well as tolerance for minorities and their languages.
5. The **domain of power**, which relates to the ability to see through language in terms of its underlying possibilities of influencing and manipulating others.

It is precisely the domain of power and affection, which must be emphasised here. We communicate through language about the world and its order. With it, we largely regulate social relations. Language is a condition for exercising power and as such power in itself - a power, which is to be understood as a factor in a social relationship, structuring the possibilities of action of the actors. The terms in which we think **shape the image of political-social reality and influence behaviour**. This conceptual function of language represents structural power. Those who wish to overcome such a power must be aware of the linguistic patterns, which support and constitute such a power structure.

One example of a linguistic power structure is the so-called **othering**: through the construction of others as a deviation from “we”, one linguistically constitutes an **emphasis of “we”** and, at the same time, ensures the **exclusion of others**. In racist language, *othering* is very often combined with national stereotypes, such as “foreigners are taking away our jobs”. Linguistically, the strategy of *othering* can be opposed using different argumentation strategies, such as specifically questioning what “they” refers to. Alternatively, addressing affective components, such as one's own **concerns** or the concrete demand for **personal experiences** can also prove successful. As a first overview of argumentation strategies against right-wing and racist ideas, we recommend an article by *Demokratie Leben*.³

FRAMING

Framing, according to the slightly simplified definition of Wikipedia, is the process of embedding events and themes into interpretation grids. Complex information is thus selected and structured, so that a specific problem definition, cause attribution, moral evaluation and/or recommendation for action is emphasised in the respective topic. The effect is astonishing: whenever you place ideas and views by means of language, the brain automatically activates an interpretation framework in your head, subconsciously and in milliseconds. This framework of interpretation stores everything we know about a particular thing in the world.

³ https://www.demokratie-leben.de/fileadmin/content/PDF-DOC-XLS/Wissen/E0045_Tandem_NRW_10_Strategien_Gegen_Stammtischparolen_Broschuere.pdf

Thus, with such linguistic frames, one can conquer the sovereignty of interpretation in political, scientific, but also in private debates: what was previously plain wrong can suddenly seem right through firm assertion and eternal repetitions. Particularly in political discourse, language is used as a resource of power in order to successfully enforce one's own convictions against the interests of others - to use the words of sociologist Max Weber. In her book *Political Framing*⁴, Elisabeth Wehling shows how the attitudes and opinions of others can be manipulated in a perfidious way through targeted parameters (interpretation frames). One vivid example of such framing is the phrase “**refugee wave**”, which was often used in the context of the refugee discussion in 2015/2016.

Word/Phrase	Frame/Interpretation frame	Effect
Refugee wave	Wave - describes a powerful force of nature that breaks over one and washes everything away	threatening, uncontrollable, clearly negative connotations

Through the targeted and often repeated setting of this frame (here: wave), a threatening and barely manageable scenario was created, which fueled fears and prejudices in relation to refugee policy. Hence, the moral evaluation structure of the refugees based on this frame was stylised from seeking help to them being the actual problem.

These frames was sometimes so effective, that other previously set positive frames (such as the “we can do it” phrase penned by Chancellor Angela Merkel) were partially superimposed, completely replaced or counter-checked. The effectiveness of frames depends not least on socialising and socio-economic factors and previous experiences of the recipients.



A sign reading “Nein! Frau Merkel wir schaffen das nicht” [translation: No! Mrs Merkel, we can't do this] in Vockerode in Saxony-Anhalt
Source: dpa/jew vfd

The **targeted setting of frames** is not reprehensible in itself. It is also part of everyday business here at Lingualife. After all, we set the appropriate frames in all created content and translations, in order to achieve the desired effect of the text and reach the respective target audience. Seen through the eyes of a **representative of civil society**, however, a completely new angle is added to the subject of framing: the **detection, disclosure, and argumentative encounters of discriminatory and racist frames** in private, semi-public, and public spaces.

Especially in our **everyday language with friends, acquaintances, and work colleagues**, it is worth taking a close look at the linguistic frames. This is where it gets particularly difficult: what to do if, for example, you suddenly encounter racist language or marginal frames in your own circle of acquaintances? You should speak out in any case and **use strong own frames in a proactive**

⁴ Wehling, Elisabeth: *Political Framing*. Herbert von Harlem Verlag, 2016.

manner. According to cognitive scientist Elisabeth Wehling, it would be a big mistake to address the frames of the (political) opponent and to take up such false claims yourself. Rather, one has to communicate one's own view and focus on one's own interpretation of a topic. Best-case-scenario would be to open up **alternative approaches** for your counterpart.

The Political and Civil Society Level

Much can be achieved simply by each individual contributing towards civil society. However, efforts must also be bundled, focused and represented externally. In addition to the political institutions of the federal and state governments, initiatives and foundations on the ground make an important contribution towards a strong democracy. For example, the Amadeu Antonio Foundation supports initiatives nationwide, which are committed to a **democratic society against right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism**. Since setting up the foundation in 1998, there have been more than 1,600 initiatives. More than ever, Germany needs a strong network of stakeholders working towards **strengthening civil society**. And these stakeholders are best supported by the active commitment of its members. But financial support in the form of donations also strengthens civil society engagement.

This month, the Lingualife team is supporting the Amadeu Antonio Foundation with a donation to promote the Foundation's anti-racism programme and clearly reject group-focused enmity. A broad selection of the foundation's programmes can be found via the following link: <https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/spenden-und-stiften/>

Final Considerations

Only where politics, civil society and all individuals raise their voices against racism together, effective action can be possible.

The aforementioned efforts by the City of Berlin and the BVG regarding the renaming of Mohrenstraße are a suitable example of interaction at all levels. The question regarding the meaning, purpose and effectiveness of this measure can now be answered as follows, taking into account the above facets: Where public streets and squares leave a name that refers to racists and anti-Semites, there are also mental spaces and frames for such thoughts. The renaming of Berlin streets and stops reminiscent of racists, anti-Semites and warmongers is the right thing to do: it sends a clear message against racism and xenophobia and takes another element out of racist frameworks. This must not hide the fact, however, that racism still holds and maintains a large sphere of influence in our society.

It therefore remains the social task of politics, civil society representatives and every one of us to identify such "racist frameworks", to counteract them and to offer alternatives. Be it in relation to naming underground stations, in conversations with friends and family or in accidental encounters with racism — the **main thing is to be determined, clear and within the framework of liberal and democratic values!**