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FOREGROUNDING AND FRAMING AS DISCOURSE STRATEGIES IN POLITICAL DEBATE A QUALITATIVE DISCOURSE-ANALYTIC STUDY OF THE FORM–MEANING INTERFACE

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Abstract: Political debate is a high-stakes, adversarial genre in which candidates compete not only over policy but over the very terms in which issues are understood. Two concepts developed in largely separate traditions bear directly on this contest: foregrounding, the stylistic notion of motivated linguistic prominence, and framing, the communication-theoretic notion of selection and salience. This study examines how the two interact, arguing that foregrounding functions as a principal linguistic mechanism through which frames are made salient in debate talk. Adopting a qualitative discourse-analytic design that combines stylistic and framing-oriented analysis, it examines a purposive sample of exchanges from publicly documented United States presidential and vice-presidential general-election debates (1976–2020). The analysis identifies a recurrent repertoire of foregrounding devices — syntactic parallelism, marked interrogatives, lexical repetition, semantic reversal, and violations of turn-taking — and shows how each is recruited to entrench particular frames, including problem-definition, moral, and self–other frames. The findings indicate that in the real-time, co-constructed environment of debate, form-level prominence and meaning-level construal are tightly coupled: memorable debate moments typically arise where a foregrounding device and a framing move coincide. The study extends stylistic foregrounding beyond its traditional literary domain and specifies the linguistic realisation of framing, with implications for political communication and critical language awareness.

Keywords: foregrounding, framing, political debate, discourse analysis, stylistics, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Political debate is among the most consequential genres of public discourse. In a compressed, adversarial, and heavily mediated encounter, candidates compete not only to defend policy positions but to control the interpretive terms in which issues, opponents, and they themselves are perceived. Because debate is conducted live and co-constructed turn by turn, the linguistic choices candidates make are unusually visible and unusually consequential: a single utterance can crystallise into a soundbite that outlives every substantive argument in the exchange. Understanding how such utterances work requires attention both to their linguistic form and to the interpretive schemata they activate.

Two concepts, developed in largely separate scholarly traditions, speak directly to these two levels. The first is foregrounding, the stylistic notion — originating in Prague School poetics (Mukařovský, 1964) and developed within linguistic stylistics (Halliday, 1971; Leech & Short, 2007; van Peer, 1986) — that certain linguistic features are made to stand out against a background of ordinary usage through deviation or parallelism, and that this motivated prominence is interpretively significant (Leech, 2008). The second is framing, the communication-theoretic notion that to

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communicate is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient so as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or remedy (Entman, 1993). Framing has become central to the study of political language, notably in work on the moral frames that organise political thought (Lakoff, 2002, 2004) and on the psychology of framing effects (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

The televised political debate is a genre with distinctive discursive constraints that heighten the relevance of both concepts. It is dialogic and adversarial, so that every utterance is produced in anticipation of, and often in direct response to, an opponent; it is time-bounded and rule-governed, so that candidates compete for a scarce and closely regulated floor; and it is doubly addressed, spoken ostensibly to a moderator or opponent but designed for an overhearing mass audience (Wilson, 1990). Under these conditions candidates cannot develop extended argument at leisure; they must compress evaluation into compact, quotable form. The functional theory of political campaign discourse captures part of this dynamic, analysing debate talk as a mixture of acclaims that praise the self, attacks that criticise the opponent, and defences that answer attacks (Benoit, 2007). What that functional account leaves open is the question of linguistic realisation: by what formal means is an acclaim or attack made to land?

These two literatures — foregrounding on the one hand, framing on the other — have rarely been brought into contact. Stylistic foregrounding has been applied overwhelmingly to literary texts, while framing research has concentrated on media content and message effects, often with limited attention to fine-grained linguistic realisation. Yet in the debate context the two appear intimately related: a candidate who wishes to make a frame salient must do so through some perceptible linguistic means, and foregrounding is precisely the machinery of salience at the level of form. This study therefore treats foregrounding and framing not as competing descriptions but as complementary levels of a single process, and asks how they combine in debate discourse. Situated within critical and political discourse analysis (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2002), it addresses three research questions:

RQ1. What foregrounding devices recur in the discourse of political debate? **RQ2.** What framing strategies do debaters deploy? **RQ3.** How does foregrounding function to make particular frames salient?

2. Methods

2.1 Design

The study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic design that integrates two analytical lenses: a stylistic analysis of foregrounding and a framing-oriented critical analysis. The rationale for a qualitative approach is that the object of enquiry — the interpretive coupling of linguistic form and communicative construal — is not reducible to frequency counts but requires close, context-sensitive reading of situated utterances. The design is exploratory and theory-building rather than hypothesis-testing: its aim is to characterise the repertoire of strategies and to model their interaction.

2.2 Data

The data consist of a purposive sample of exchanges drawn from publicly available transcripts of United States presidential and vice-presidential general-election debates held between 1976 and 2020, as archived in the public record (The American Presidency Project, n.d.). Purposive sampling was chosen deliberately: because the study seeks to model how foregrounding and framing operate at

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their most consequential, it targets exchanges that are well documented and rhetorically salient rather than a random cross-section of debate talk. This sampling strategy supports analytical, not statistical, generalisation; its limitations are considered in Section 4. All excerpts analysed are matters of public record, and each is attributed to its speaker and debate.

2.3 Analytical framework

Foregrounding was analysed following the stylistic tradition, which distinguishes two broad mechanisms of prominence: deviation, in which a feature departs from an expected norm, and parallelism, in which repeated structures create prominence through unexpected regularity (Leech & Short, 2007; van Peer, 1986). Within debate discourse, attention was directed to lexical repetition and anaphora, marked syntax (clefts, fronting, left-dislocation), rhetorical questions and marked direct address, semantic deviation such as irony and reversal, and marked management of turn-taking, including interruption. Framing was analysed using Entman's (1993) four framing functions — problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and remedy — supplemented by the analysis of moral frames (Lakoff, 2002) and by van Dijk's (2002) "ideological square" of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. The functional categories of acclaiming, attacking, and defending (Benoit, 2007) were used to characterise the interactional work of each move.

2.4 Procedure

Analysis proceeded through iterative close reading. Each selected excerpt was examined first for foregrounding devices and then for framing functions, and analytic memos recorded how the two levels related in each case. A summary matrix (Table 1) was then constructed to map recurrent device types onto their framing effects. Because the analysis was conducted by a single analyst, interpretations are necessarily perspectival; the procedure should therefore be read as a replicable analytical model rather than as a claim to inter-subjective agreement, and Section 4 identifies the addition of independent coding as a priority for confirmatory work.

3. Results

The analysis is presented in three parts: the foregrounding devices identified (3.1), the framing strategies identified (3.2), and the interface between them (3.3), which constitutes the study's principal finding. Table 1 summarises the pattern.

3.1 Foregrounding devices

Five families of foregrounding device recurred across the sample. The first is syntactic parallelism and anaphora. In the 1988 vice-presidential debate, Lloyd Bentsen answered Dan Quayle's comparison of himself to John F. Kennedy with a tightly parallel triadic structure culminating in the direct address *"Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy"* (Bentsen, 1988). The repeated clause structure builds a rhythmic regularity that foregrounds the final, deviating clause and lends it the force of a verdict. The second family is the marked interrogative. Reagan's *"Are you better off than you were four years ago?"* (Reagan, 1980), delivered as a closing direct address to the audience rather than to his opponent, foregrounds an evaluative question through its marked orientation and its placement at a structurally prominent moment.

The third family is formulaic repetition and dismissal. Reagan's *"There you go again"* (Reagan, 1980), a colloquial formula intruding into the elevated register of a presidential debate, deviates from the expected style and thereby foregrounds the opponent as tiresomely repetitive. The fourth is semantic deviation, especially irony. In 1984, Reagan defused concern about his age by promising not

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to exploit his opponent's *"youth and inexperience"* (Reagan, 1984); the reversal of the expected evaluation of youth foregrounds age as an asset. The fifth family is the marked violation of turn-taking. In 2020, Joe Biden's *"Will you shut up, man?"* (Biden, 2020) breaches the decorum of the genre, and the very breach foregrounds the opponent's conduct as disruptive.

Two features of these devices are worth noting. First, they are economical: each achieves its effect in a handful of words, a property well suited to a genre in which floor time is scarce and the overhearing audience remembers fragments rather than arguments. Second, they exploit the debate's norms rather than existing independently of them. Parallelism stands out against the largely non-parallel run of spontaneous speech; a colloquial formula stands out against the elevated register expected of a presidential candidate; an interruption stands out against the turn-taking rules the format imposes. Foregrounding in debate is thus thoroughly context-dependent: what makes a feature prominent is its deviation from the specific expectations of this genre, not from language in general — a point that echoes the stylistic insight that prominence is relative to an established norm (Mukařovský, 1964; van Peer, 1986).

3.2 Framing strategies

The framing strategies observed map readily onto Entman's (1993) four functions. Problem-definition framing was pervasive, as debaters competed to establish whose account of the situation would count as the situation: Reagan's closing question in 1980, for instance, does not argue that the economy has failed so much as define economic performance as the question on which the election turns. Causal-attribution and remedy framing followed, assigning responsibility for the defined problem and positioning the speaker's programme as its solution. Moral framing in Lakoff's (2002) sense was recurrent, with candidates appealing to competing models of responsibility, security, and fairness rather than to isolated policy details.

Most consistently, the data displayed the two poles of van Dijk's (2002) ideological square: candidates framed themselves through positive self-presentation — competence, empathy, strength — while framing opponents through negative other-presentation as weak, extreme, dishonest, or out of touch. The two poles were frequently activated in a single move, since to diminish an opponent is simultaneously to elevate oneself by contrast. In functional terms (Benoit, 2007), these frames were realised through acclaims, attacks, and defences, with attacks on the opponent's character or competence particularly prominent in the salient exchanges examined — a distribution consistent with the observation that debate's adversarial structure rewards the memorable attack over the measured defence.

3.3 The foregrounding–framing interface

The central finding is that foregrounding and framing are systematically coupled: in the salient moments examined, a foregrounding device and a framing move coincide, the former making the latter memorable. Bentsen's parallelism does not merely decorate; it foregrounds and thereby entrenches a character-and-experience frame that delegitimises the opponent. Reagan's marked interrogative foregrounds an economic-performance frame, inviting the audience to define the incumbent's record as the central problem and to supply the damning answer themselves. His formulaic *"there you go again"* foregrounds a credibility frame that construes the opponent as unreliable, while the ironic *"youth and inexperience"* reframes a personal vulnerability as a strength. Even an unintended case fits the pattern: Ford's *"There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe"* (Ford, 1976) deviated sharply from shared background knowledge, and that deviation foregrounded — against the speaker's intention — a frame of the candidate as out of touch. Across these cases,

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foregrounding operates as the stylistic engine of framing: the device secures salience, and salience is precisely what a frame requires to take hold.

The direction of the coupling is worth stating precisely. Framing supplies the interpretive content — what the audience is invited to believe about the problem, the cause, the moral stakes, or the person — while foregrounding supplies the perceptual and mnemonic prominence that lifts that content out of the surrounding talk and fixes it in memory. Neither level is sufficient alone. A frame advanced without foregrounding may be accurate and even persuasive in the moment yet leave no trace, dissolving into the undifferentiated flow of the exchange; a foregrounded utterance that carries no frame may be noticed and even enjoyed yet do no persuasive work. The consequential debate moment is the conjunction of the two, and the analysis suggests that skilled debaters manage this conjunction deliberately, reserving their most marked linguistic resources for the frames they most wish to entrench. This also clarifies why such moments are so often attacks: negative other-presentation, being both concrete and adversarial, lends itself readily to the compact, deviant, memorable forms that foregrounding favours.

Table 1. *Foregrounding devices and their framing effects in the debate sample*

Foregrounding device	Mechanism	Framing effect
Syntactic parallelism / anaphora	Parallelism	Entrenches a character/experience frame; delegitimises the opponent
Marked interrogative / direct address	Deviation	Foregrounds an evaluative (e.g. economic-performance) frame; recruits the audience
Formulaic repetition / dismissal	Register deviation	Construes the opponent as repetitive or unreliable (credibility frame)
Semantic reversal / irony	Semantic deviation	Reframes a vulnerability as a strength (self-presentation)
Violation of turn-taking / interruption	Interactional deviation	Foregrounds the opponent's conduct as disruptive (negative other-presentation)

4. Discussion

The results support the study's central claim: in political debate, foregrounding and framing are two levels of a single strategic process. Framing research has established that political persuasion works largely by rendering some construal of reality salient (Entman, 1993; Lakoff, 2004), but it has said less about the linguistic means by which salience is achieved in situated talk. Stylistics, conversely, has richly theorised the mechanisms of prominence (Leech & Short, 2007; van Peer, 1986) but has applied them chiefly to literature. Bringing the two together shows that the memorable debate moment is characteristically the point at which a foregrounding device and a framing move converge: the device makes the frame perceptually and mnemonically salient, and the frame gives the device its persuasive payload. This coupling helps explain why debate soundbites are so disproportionately influential relative to the substantive argumentation around them.

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The analysis also extends existing frameworks in specific ways. It carries stylistic foregrounding beyond its literary home into the domain of adversarial political interaction, where the co-constructed, real-time character of the genre gives prominence special force. It specifies, at the level of form, the ideological work described by critical discourse analysts: van Dijk's (2002) positive self- and negative other-presentation and Benoit's (2007) acclaims, attacks, and defences are, on this evidence, routinely realised through identifiable foregrounding devices. The finding that even an unintended deviation (Ford, 1976) foregrounded an unwanted frame underscores that foregrounding is a property of the discourse as received, not merely of the speaker's intention — a point consistent with the view of foregrounding as motivated but not always controlled prominence.

Positioning the account theoretically, the study suggests a productive division of labour among the frameworks it draws upon rather than a competition between them. Framing theory (Entman, 1993) and moral-frame analysis (Lakoff, 2002) describe the interpretive schemata at stake; critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2002) describes the ideological work those schemata perform; the functional theory of campaign discourse (Benoit, 2007) describes the interactional purposes — acclaim, attack, defence — that the talk serves; and stylistic foregrounding (Leech & Short, 2007; van Peer, 1986) describes the formal means by which all of the above are made salient. The contribution of the present analysis is to show that these levels are not merely compatible but interlocking in the debate genre, and to locate their point of contact in the specific utterances where a foregrounding device realises a framing move. In this sense the study answers a question each framework tends to leave to the others: framing research can say what is made salient, and stylistics can say how.

These findings have practical implications. For political communication and media literacy, they suggest that audiences and analysts can be taught to notice the formal cues — parallelism, marked questions, register shifts, interruptions — that signal an attempt to entrench a frame, and thereby to interrogate the construal rather than absorb it. Recognising that a memorable line is memorable by design, and that its design is doing persuasive work, is itself a critical skill. For language education, and for critical language awareness in particular, debate offers accessible, high-interest material through which learners can be shown how form and meaning interact persuasively, complementing established uses of political discourse in the classroom (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 1995).

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The study is qualitative and its sample purposive, so its claims are analytical rather than statistical; the recurrence of the identified strategies across a broader, systematically sampled corpus remains to be established. The data are confined to a single national and linguistic context, United States debates in English, and framing conventions vary cross-culturally. Analysis relied on transcripts, so prosodic and multimodal resources — stress, timing, gesture — that contribute heavily to foregrounding in live debate were not systematically examined. Finally, the analysis was conducted by a single analyst and captures the discourse as produced rather than as received; it includes no audience-reception data. Future research should accordingly test the framework on a larger corpus with independent coders and formal reliability checks, extend it cross-linguistically, incorporate multimodal and prosodic analysis, and connect the textual patterns identified here to measured effects on audiences.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to connect two concepts that bear on political debate but are seldom analysed together: foregrounding and framing. Analysing a purposive sample of documented debate exchanges, it found that the two are systematically coupled, with foregrounding functioning as the linguistic mechanism through which frames are made salient. The most consequential moments of political

debate tend to occur where a foregrounding device and a framing move coincide, uniting formal prominence with interpretive construal. In treating form and meaning as a single strategic system, the study extends stylistic analysis into political interaction and gives critical and framing accounts a more precise linguistic anchor — an integration that repays further, and larger-scale, investigation.

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