

Towards a Deeper Understanding of Framing, Footing, and Alignment

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Goffman's (1974, 1981) ideas on *framing*, *footing*, and *alignment* provide a powerful lens for examining social roles, how they are signaled, and how speakers position themselves vis-à-vis one another during interactions. However, as constructs, these terms can be so squishy that one is tempted to quote that famous Supreme Court line on the definition of pornography: "I might not be able to define it, but I know it when I see it" (Simpson, 1988). On the one hand, the richness of Goffman's notions resides precisely in their ability qua metaphors to be sufficiently imprecise to capture the vagaries and ambivalences of the human condition. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) note, the very strength of metaphors is in their ability to express what is hard to pin down in more reductionist ways. So, it is not surprising that Goffman (who was always more of a big picture guy, than a data-driven positivist) would bequeath to us a way of looking at interaction that is as compelling and effective as it is messy and somewhat vague. On the other hand, the strength of one's work in the social sciences often rests on empirical research. Consequently, finding workable definitions for constructs—which, by their very nature, can be elusive—is an important part of the game. And hitting upon a definition others embrace is tantamount to striking gold.

I am not, by nature, a prospector. Since my roots are in the humanities, I was fairly content to see Goffman's use of framing, footing, and alignment as metaphorical and leave it at that. However, Dr. Leslie Beebe came of age when Labov was revolutionizing the study of the relationship of society to language in more quantifiable ways. She brought the same need to be data-driven and precise to her study of discourse as Labov did to language variation. To work with Leslie was to be reminded that that ideas as well as texts must track (i.e., that there is a real virtue in consistency, when sound) from a theoretical and empirical point of view. In other words, she dragged me kicking and screaming to an attempt to define what framing, footing, and alignment might really mean. And, as almost always happened when Leslie pushed me to do something I did not want to do, in retrospect I have come to the conclusion that Leslie was right. While I have in no way struck gold, I do have some thoughts I hope will contribute to a deeper understanding of how the terms framing, footing, and alignment can, or perhaps should, be used.

Frames can minimally be thought of in at least three ways: (1) as metaphorical containers, (2) as structures of expectations (Bateson, 2000; Goffman, 1974; Tannen 1993), and (3) as opinion shapers or thought manipulators (Lakoff, 2004). As Lakoff (2004) notes:

Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world...the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions....You can't see or hear frames. They are part of [our] cognitive unconscious—structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences: the way we reason and what counts as common sense. We also know frames through language. All words are defined in relation to conceptual frames. When you hear a word, its frame (or collection of frames) is activated in your brain. (p. xv)

When we speak of frame as a noun, we are often thinking of some kind of metaphorical

container, some bounded unit in space and time (physical or imagined) holding different objects and/or elements. This boundedness sets up a relationship between the objects and/or elements within the frame, their footing vis-à-vis one another (i.e., where they figuratively stand). On the one hand, frames juxtapose the elements within them in different ways, or show how the elements relate to one another from a physical or psychological perspective, including whether or not they are aligned. On the other hand, the very boundedness of the objects within a frame makes them appear to cohere; they tell a story or collectively mean something. Sacks (1992) was getting at this kind of coherence when he wrote that *the baby cried* and *the mommy picked her up* formed a story because our common sense notions of cause and effect and family relations lead us to frame the two utterances as related (i.e., to hear them this way). We do this, according to Bateson (2000), Goffman (1974, 1981), and Tannen (1993), because we have socially and culturally-embedded *schema* or *structures of expectation* about what the juxtaposition of certain elements within a frame means. In other words, frames are metaphorical containers that hold information, as well as provide us with the structural and cognitive resources for interpreting that information. As Goodwin (1992) writes, events are embedded in contexts (or frames) which provide the resources for interpreting them. A *bracketed strip of action* (Goffman, 1974, 1981) contains certain elements that become intelligible to us, providing us with a metamessage (Tannen, 1993), because we are socially and cognitively predisposed to see the relationship between these elements in certain ways.

As Goffman (1974) points out, there are times we try to shift frames (re-frame or alter these social and cognitive relationships) within a social interaction by shifting our footing, the stance or alignment interlocutors take up vis-à-vis one another and their utterances. Levinson (1988) writes that footing is the projection of a speaker's stance towards an utterance (its truth value and emotional content), as well as towards other parties and events. Thus, shifts in footing are tantamount to gear shifts that can affect task, tone, social roles, and interpersonal alignments (Goffman, 1981). A shift in footing can affect prior status and social distance arrangements among interlocutors. Some shifts are momentary suspensions of social relations that are later resumed (i.e., mini re-framings embedded within longer strips of on-going action). For instance, Goffman describes Nixon momentarily shifting out of his presidential frame to make a personal comment on an outfit that Helen Thomas, a journalist, was wearing. (She was wearing a pantsuit, and he preferred her in a dress.) However, as Levinson (1992) notes, some shifts in footing have more enduring implications, transforming social relations, and sometimes whole activities, into something else.

With respect to alignment, one must note three factors. First, while alignment is often used synonymously with *agreement*, it should be understood to include any kind of synchronization across participants on the intellectual and/or emotional level. At times, speakers are emotionally but not intellectually aligned, or vice versa. Second, agreement does not necessarily mean real consensus; often it is a question of pseudo-accord, or "agreement as to whose claims about certain issues are going to dominate" (Hargreaves, as cited in Winograd, 2002, p. 347). As a result, the less power one has, the harder one may work at projecting alignment in order to ingratiate. And third, there is an unfortunate tendency among many researchers to view most projections of alignment as in some way self-serving or feigned. In part, this grows naturally out of Goffman's (1959) work on impression management where he speaks of the role of social white lies in the protection of face, or, that we project alignment by "assert[ing] values to which everyone [can] pay *lip service*, [italics added]," creating a "surface of agreement, [a] veneer of consensus" (Goffman, 1959, p. 9) in hopes of warding off conflict so everyone gets at least some of their goals met.

In other words, some projections of alignment are really just ritualistic dance steps—a choreographed tango we perform with a conversational partner we assume to be dissimulating on some level as well, and one who may well be, by virtue of a greater power over us, actually leading us (i.e., controlling our very steps on the dance floor). However, not all alignment is self-serving or feigned. Some projections are heart-felt. While using language as a tool for deconstructing hidden power relationships has real value when examining social problems, it is important to remember that there is a great deal of power in solidarity, as well. Though perhaps harder to quantify and not as sexy to discuss, when it comes to solving social problems, it is often solidarity (true alignment) that brings about the greatest and most enduring social change.

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