

A Rhetorical Analysis of Framing Devices in John Kerry's Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

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Kerry's testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is a very rich text, one that relates in all kinds of interesting ways to its cultural and political context. It also resonates in some provocative ways with issues surrounding the current conflict in Iraq – when is protesting disloyal? Where should responsibility lie for atrocities? The reasons given for going to war. And of course it is a deeply contested text – appearing as it did in the ads from the Swift Boat Veterans group during the 2004 presidential elections, and in countless arguments about its meaning on cable news and talk radio. As Bakhtin might put it, the meaning and context surrounding this text is both site of and stake in political struggle.

I'd like to start by examining how Kerry uses framing devices. Much of Kerry's argument consists of reframing official accounts of the war, what it means to protest the war, acknowledge wartime atrocities by soldiers, negotiate for peace, and bring the troops home. This is a wise rhetorical strategy since these are very difficult topics to broach directly. Much of his argument consists of inviting a reader to consider an alternative framework from which to see these issues, and I think it was the power of this alternative framework that so concerned Nixon and his advisors at the time.

So what are framing devices? Frames are typically constructed through the use of metaphors, definitions, narratives, categories and meta-linguistic commentary. They are

used to get an audience to attend to certain elements of a situation and ignore others; to construct a particular way of seeing an issue, event, person or group, and to shape the way an audience understands the context of communication. They can have persuasive effects. For example, there are some famous experiments in social psychology in which test subjects watch a video of a multi-car accident. The subjects are then asked questions about the accident, and depending on how the question is framed – was it a “collision,” “smash,” “crash,” etc., the subjects are more likely to over or under-estimate speeds, to report that they saw shattered glass on the ground, etc. Or think, for example of how the Bush administration has framed conflict with Iraq – this has perhaps contributed to certain perceptions about the war that relate to how some people think about Hussein’s relationship to 9-11, and who the 9-11 hijackers were.

Consider, for example, the familiar metaphor of argument as war that we are all familiar with – you try to establish a strong “position,” “support” your position, “defend” it from “counterattacks,” etc. This metaphor and its entailments create an agonistic frame for understanding argumentation, one that some argumentation theorists have subjected to sustained critique. Or think about other war metaphors: “war on drugs” and “war on terror,” which create frames for understanding drug policy and foreign policy.

Narratives obviously create frames, and so do categories: sticking with the topic of war for the moment, at the time Kerry gave his speech, the titles of university courses that dealt with the Vietnam war were sometimes disputed. I remember my father, a student in a political science class called “Insurgency in South East Asia,” describing how students

requested that the course title be changed. Similarly issues pertain with respect to the conflict in Iraq: the media must choose whether to talk about “insurgents,” “terrorists,” “resistance fighters,” “Islamic radicals,” or some other term to talk about the people committing violent acts against U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians. Each term sets up a different frame of reference for understanding the conflict and the identity of those involved. So metaphors, particularly root metaphors, or what White calls “constitutive metaphors,’ are often used to construct frames. Narratives are also centrally important in the construction of frames. For example, some scholars have examined how the administration of George H. Bush took some time to find the best narrative frame to persuade the public on the need for the U.S. to intervene in the first Gulf conflict. (Winkler, “Narrative Reframing of Public Argument: George Bush’s Handling of the Persian Gulf Conflict.”) The administration began with accounts that emphasized stopping aggression, defending national interests, defending Saudi Arabia, protecting US citizens abroad, and curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It found limited success until it tried using narrative to create the frame of Iraq as terrorist threat

Metalinguistic commentary is important in framing texts, and in particular in constructing a context for the text.

A quick example. In the Senate hearing which considered Anita Hill’s charges of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas, Anita Hill gave her testimony, but did not step outside the frame, did not comment reflexively on her text and the surrounding context. By contrast, Clarence Thomas spent much of his testimony in metalinguistic commentary. He challenged the legitimacy of the hearings, the position he was put in,

and argued for a reframing of the context as a “high tech lynching,” as un-American, as Kafkaesque; he argued that Hill’s testimony was a lie, and refused to address key parts of it, framing this refusal in terms of a desire to protect his private life and his family, and because doing so put him in an impossible position – as he put it, of “proving the negative”. So he successfully constructed a frame in which he was the victim, in which he was subjected to slander, governmental and racial persecution; a frame in which he circumscribed what he would and would not talk about. Some critics suggest that his success in doing so in part explains why he was not successfully attacked by the Democrats, as opposed to the way Anita Hill was - he successfully shifted the grounds on which the argument and hearing took place

Kerry’s Text & Metalinguistic Commentary

As with Clarence Thomas’s testimony, Kerry’s text begins with a metalinguistic move, that of stepping outside the frame of testimony to direct the audience on how to understand his words. He says, “I am not here as John Kerry,” and “My sitting here is symbolic.” Kerry represents himself as merely the voice of a much larger group, and in what follows Kerry consistently talks in terms of “we,” “our,” and “us” rather than “I” or “me.” This has several effects. First, it adds weight to his testimony – he represents himself as reporting on the experience and testimony of many others, particularly as this relates to the issue of military atrocities. It also helps establish an ethos of humility. Just before Kerry’s testimony starts, he is asked by Senator Fulbright to state his name and provide a biographical description, but he declines to do this in his testimony (in the question and answer session afterward, the senators insist on providing this biography in

one of those questions that are really comments – one asks Kerry, is it true you fought in a Swift boat, received three purple hearts and a silver star, rescued a crew member, etc.) This ethos of humility is reinforced by several other statements later in the text, as for example when Kerry says he can't debate the senators on the fine points of foreign policy because he is "outclassed." The question and answer session that follows his testimony makes clear that this is not true.

Military Metaphors

I'd like to look next at how Kerry uses military metaphors to frame his discussion of protest, and to frame discussion of the goals of making peace with the Vietnamese and ending the war. Kerry states that veterans against the war are engaged in "one last mission – to search out and destroy the last vestige of this barbaric war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and the fear that have driven this country these last ten years and more." Kerry wants the audience to reject the notion that protest is a betrayal of soldiers, that trying to end the war is cowardly or a withdrawal, and so he frames this in terms of martial valor, sacrifice, loyalty and engagement.

Something similar is at work in the title of his group, "Winter Soldiers." They are, he says, the opposite of summertime patriots who desert when the fight gets tough. Again, this frames anti-war protest by veterans as a kind of battle on behalf of comrades and a refusal to give up in the face of an enemy.

This is one of many strategic reframings in which Kerry inverts what was at the time the

dominant way of looking at the war. For example, [on page 892] Kerry rebuts Agnew's description of protestors as criminal misfits who betray soldiers, soldiers who are "our best men," and who are nobly dying to protect the misfits' very freedom. Kerry states: "those he calls misfits were standing up for us in a way that nobody else in this country dared to." Kerry frames the protestors as supporting the troops and as showing daring and bravery. By contrast, Kerry frames the actions of Agnew and other administration leaders in the same terms that they apply to protestors, using categories such as "disloyalty," "dishonor," "betrayal" and "cowardice." Kerry describes the failure to provide proper medical, psychological and economic support to veterans as disloyalty; he describes the Nixon administration's attempt to stop Vietnam Veterans against the war from protesting in Washington D.C. as "the ultimate dishonor." Kerry describes McNamara and other architects of the war as "commanders who have deserted their troops, and there is no more serious crime in the laws of war." And he accuses the president of continuing the war because he is a coward, afraid to be seen as "the first president to lose a war."

More generally, Kerry reframes withdrawal from Vietnam and the negotiation of peace in terms of a narrative of moral redemption. The actions that have been carried out by some soldiers are both symptom of and threat to the moral health of the country. Kerry states: "It is because of what threatens this country, not the Reds, but the crimes we are committing that threaten it, that we must speak out." Confessing to these crimes is needed in order for the country to receive absolution and heal itself. According to Kerry, what is wrong with the war is in many respects what is wrong with U.S. society – racism,

brutality, inequality. Ending the war is framed as part of a struggle to end these problems and find redemption, or as Kerry puts it “to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and the fear that have driven this country these last ten years and more.” This is rhetorically quite powerful, for in this framework, ending the war is not about defeat and withdrawal, and deaths that were for nothing, but about redemption and absolution and creating a better country.

I think this narrative of redemption and absolution is also a central part of understanding how Kerry frames the charge of war crimes. This is important, since Kerry’s representation of atrocities carried out by soldiers was successfully used against him during the presidential election in a way that seems to me to willfully misread what he said. So I’d like to spend a moment talking about how he frames the discussion of war crimes, how he positions his argument on this topic, and how he uses pronouns to assign agency, responsibility and guilt.

Using Frames to Construct Agency, Responsibility and Guilt

Kerry begins his testimony by describing how the Winter Soldier Investigation has revealed atrocities carried out by some soldiers. He picks this topic up again in the main body of the text. This is how he describes the situation:

“We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly a Mai Lai and refused to give up the image of American soldiers who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum. We

learned the meaning of free fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of Orientals. We watched the United States falsification of body counts, in fact the glorification of body counts
We listened while month after month we were told the back of the enemy was about to break... We watched while men charged up hills because a general said that hill has to be taken.” [p. 893]

Several things are interesting about this. First, like the rest of the text, the narrative voice is a collective voice, the voice of “we,” “our” and “us.” This framing of his criticism carries out several things at once: it does not exempt him from responsibility, it also assigns responsibility to the wider “we” of the public, it simultaneously expresses solidarity with soldiers and the public, and sets up a “they”, consisting of the U.S. government and military officials.

To a large extent Kerry downplays the agency of soldiers – they are represented as a rather passive group. In the passage just quoted the verbs describing soldiers’ actions involve seeing, listening, learning, and watching, rather than killing, raping or shooting. Much of the agency and responsibility is assigned the country and military, as when he talks of how “America placed a cheapness on the lives of Orientals. We watched the United States falsification of body counts, in fact the glorification of body counts.” You can also see an unwillingness to blame soldiers in his reference to Lieutenant Calley, the person in charge at the Mai Lai massacre. Kerry describes him as “a man who followed

orders and who interpreted those orders no differently than hundreds of other men in Vietnam.”

In Kerry’s discussion of atrocities soldiers are represented primarily as bearing witness – of “seeing,” “watching,” “hearing,” etc. For Kerry, a large part of the point of discussing these things seems to lie in the need to confess what happened and to seek redemption.

In conclusion, much of Kerry’s arguments consist of metaphors, definitions, narratives and metalinguistic moves that reshape (then) conventional images of the war. If one accepts this reframing of the issues and actors involved, then Kerry’s conclusions follow readily and are imbued with much persuasive force. Kerry’s testimony provides an interesting example of how arguments can be constructed that proceed in large part through a series of strategic re-framings of accounts of war.

Works Cited

Winkler, Carol. “Narrative Reframing of Public Argument: George Bush’s Handling of the Persian Gulf Conflict.” In E. Schiappa (Ed.), *Warranting Assent: Case Studies in Argumentation Evaluation* (pp. 155-191). Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995.