

A Multi-Layered Framework of Framing

Rebekah J. Johnson

Teachers College, Columbia University

Professor Leslie M. Beebe has always been an unfailing source of encouragement, a wealth of knowledge and insight, and a wonderful critic. She has taught me much about pragmatics and sociolinguistics, the foundations of my current interests in the social construction of meaning in interaction. My passion for discourse analysis developed while taking several of Professor Beebe's courses, in particular Interactional Sociolinguistics, where I was introduced to the notion of *framing*. From our classroom discussions and readings, I developed a conceptualization of framing that became the underlying framework for my subsequent research and current dissertation work on family discourse and identity construction. Below is an adaptation of the "framework of framing" from my data collection paper in the Interactional Sociolinguistics class.

Framing (Re)defined

Based on the notion of framing first proposed by Goffman in 1974 (1997a), and expanded upon by Tannen (1993) and Tannen and Wallat (1993), I propose a multi-layered framework of framing, in which the various facets of a situation can be seen in qualitatively different types of overlapping notions of frames. Goffman uses Bateson's (1972) term *frame* to address the question an individual must ask in any social situation: "What is going on here?" (Goffman, 1997a, p. 153) and defines frame analysis as "the examination... of the organization of experience" (p. 155). Goffman's exploration of talk through frame analysis is based upon "social presuppositions" (1997b, p. 167). Tannen goes on to discuss frames as "structures of expectations" (1993, p. 21), and Tannen and Wallat (1993) make a distinction between *interactive frames*, which define "what is going on" (p. 59) in every interaction, and *knowledge schemas*, or "participants' expectations about people, objects, events and settings in the world" (p. 60). To make sense of the many definitions and uses of framing, I categorized notions of frames in the literature into four categories: *situational*, *functional*, *tonal*, and *character frames*.

The physical setting can be referred to as the situational frame, where the interactants have a certain set of expectations based on the setting (e.g., school or a place of work) and a related *footing* within that setting (see Goffman, 1981, and Levinson, 1988, for discussions of footing). Another level of framing can be seen as relating to the Hymesian *speech event*, or, the functional frame (e.g., a casual conversation or a lecture). This functional frame is similar to Gumperz's (1982) *speech activity*, which he defines as "a set of social relationships enacted about a set of schemata in relation to some communicative goal" (p. 166). Included within the functional frame are subframes based on differing functions (e.g., telling a joke, telling a story) being accomplished within the larger function. Both situational and functional framing are included in Tannen and Wallat's (1993) discussion of knowledge schemas, or, the expectations we have about the ways people speak and act in particular situations.

Another set of frames would relate to the tone each conversational participant chooses to display through his or her words and actions during the interaction, (e.g., a joking tone, a sarcastic tone, or a serious tone). Each interactant could have differing tonal frames (i.e., one participant is

in a joking frame while their interlocutor is in a serious frame). These tonal frames are similar to Bateson's (1972) notion of psychological frames, which describes interactants as operating under overall frames, such as play or serious. Yet another type of frame can be referred to as character framing, including both the way each participant wants to show him- or herself to other participants, which I call *self-imposed framing* (i.e., the way each person frames him- or herself as intelligent, powerful, and trustworthy), and the way interactants are framing one another during the interaction, or *other-imposed framing*. If these character frames are matching, then participants are aligning with one another and co-constructing an agreed-upon character for each person involved; if they are in conflict, the interactants are not aligned with one another. Character framing is based upon both the way the participants in Tannen's (1993) study frame themselves (e.g., as movie critics or as film narrative-tellers, depending on their cultural background and cultural schemata) and upon the commonly used conventional phrase regarding the way we frame ourselves (or someone else) as something in particular. Lakoff's (2004) notion of framing as being semantically driven, based on the words a person chooses (e.g., in the political realm, the ways in which conservatives and liberals position issues, and use related language to fit their respective moral worldviews), straddles the tonal and character frames. Both of these frames are constructed interactionally, reflecting Tannen and Wallat's (1993) notion of interactive frames. These varying and overlapping frames are described in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Qualitatively Different Types of Frames

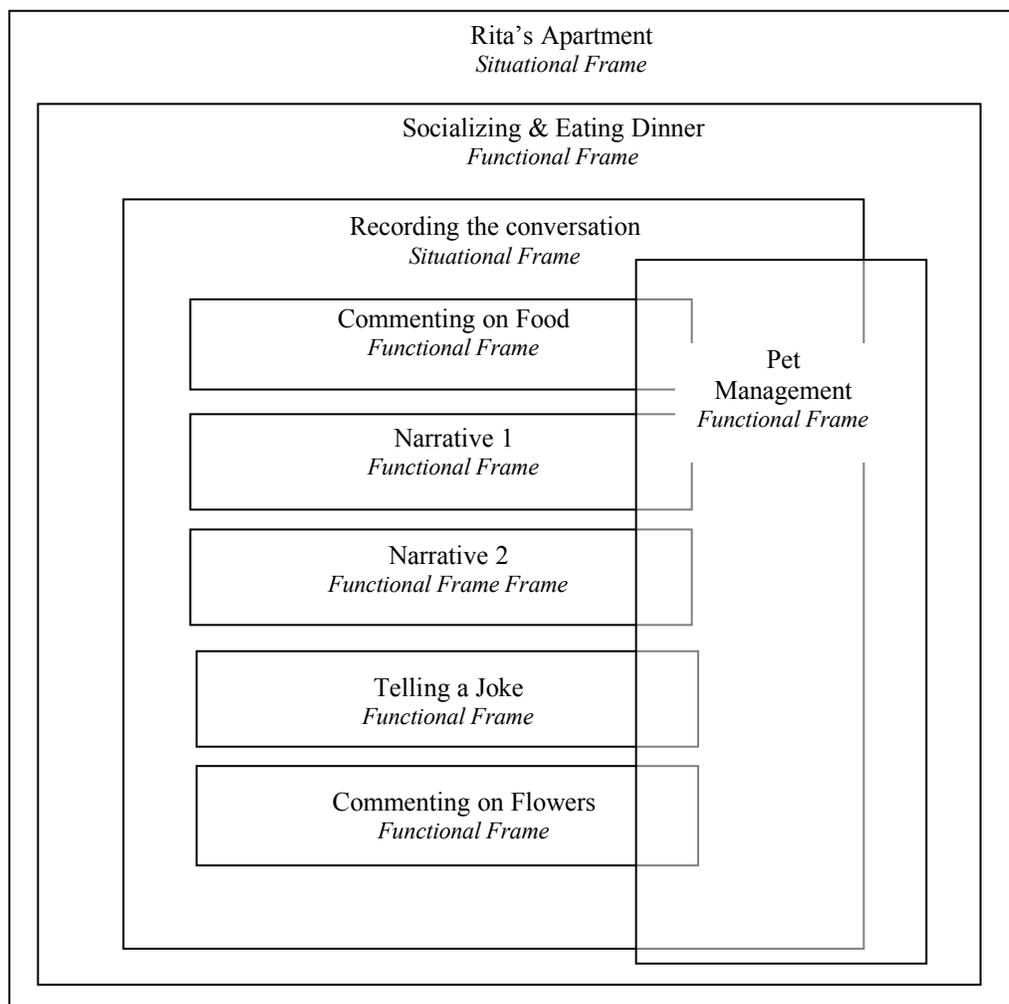
<i>Frame Type</i>		<i>Origin</i>	<i>Tannen's Categories</i>
Situational Framing		Physical space or place; setting (the building, those around the participant) Overall, main situation / reason for entire discourse to occur	Tannen & Wallat (1993) <i>Knowledge Schemas</i>
Functional Framing		Hymes (1971) <i>Speech Event</i> Gumperz (1982) <i>Speech Activity</i>	
Tonal Framing		Bateson (1972) "play" v. "serious"	Tannen & Wallat (1993) <i>Interactive Frames</i> <i>(also Lakoff, 2004 Semantic Framing)</i>
Character Framing	Self-imposed	Conventional Phrase <i>to frame oneself/someone as [X]</i>	
	Other-imposed	Tannen (1993) "characterizing herself as a [film viewer]"	

Interactants may be aligned in some but not all frames within one larger communicative situation. Depending on their footing and the stance they display, participants may be taking opposing or concurring stances within each specific frame.

Framing Applied: Martin and Rita

The data are from two participants, a male in his mid-20s, Martin, and a female in her early 30s, Rita, both of whom are white middle-class Americans living in New York City. The data come from a digitally recorded one-hour conversation between Martin and Rita, who met at Rita's apartment to eat dinner and chat. Martin is eating Mexican food throughout the conversation, and Rita is tending to putting the flowers Martin brought her into a vase, and is making sure her cat does not knock anything over. A visual organization of the frames at play during the interaction is displayed in Figure 1:

FIGURE 1
Layered Frames¹: Martin & Rita's Conversation



Many frames are simultaneously in play, and the two interactants are constantly switching between topics and functional frames, often returning to one they had left several conversational turns earlier. The setting (situational frame) is Rita's apartment. The larger functional frame is that

¹ Overlapping all of these frames are the constantly shifting tonal and character frames.

they are having a social meeting and eating dinner together; a sub-frame throughout involves digitally audio-recording the session. A side functional frame that overlaps all others is a pet management frame, in which Rita (and at times, Martin) talks to her cat in a way that is similar to *caretaker talk* or *motherese* (which is used by mothers when interacting with young children), with simplified syntax and overly inflected tones (see discussion on caretaker talk in Ellis, 1994). Other functional subframes include commenting on the flowers or about the food, telling stories (narratives), and telling a joke.

Discussion

Selected transcriptions from the data display some of these frames and how they interact, overlap, and shift constantly. One of the situational frames we see is a main part of the overall hour-long discourse, that of recording the conversation. Rita opens the dialogue with explicit comments about the recording (see Transcript A).

Transcript A – It's recording

- 1 R: I think it's recording no:w*. which would be go:od*. (2.0) It looks like it's
2 recording. ((In breathy "baby" talk:)) Hez:oh cute, hi Kitty! Hello Kitty?

Rita first talks about the recording to Martin and then codeswitches to *pet talk*, talking to the cat. As with caretaker talk, Rita modifies her speech, using a breathy quality and exaggerated intonation. The pet talk that Rita and Martin continuously shift to is also interspersed with discussion about what the cat is doing. Through these comments, both Rita and Martin are characterizing themselves as pet caretakers. Sometimes Martin and Rita shift between multiple frames at a dizzying pace, as shown in Transcript B.

Transcript B – *The Onion* and the Flowers

- 1 M: .hhhhh I'd-uh-Did you see The Onion headline? About the pope?=
2 R: =No* I have not actually checked in the Onion for a long time. (0.3) No time
3 ((sing-songy voice))-maybe I'll bring my computer out ther:e.
4 M: ^Pope's^ ()huh huh
5 R: Kitty. (Baby/Pet talk voice) C'mon kitty. ((water begins running)) C'men kitty.
6 M: Hah hah hah. ^Ronald Reagan's (.) body^ [Huh huh. HAH HAH HAH.
7 R: [C'mon kitty. (.) C'mon kitty.
8 R: I have to--put the w-flowers in water anyway.
9 M: Yeah.
10 R: I need a vase.
11 M: Well, right [up-
12 R: [Don't tell me anything! Ima-I'm gonna unh=
13 M: =OK. Well believe me, I'm not spillin any secrets when I say this one is right
14 up there with ((ironic voice)) 'Ronald Reagan's Body Dies' and ((ironic voice))
15 'Nancy Reagan, Single at Eighty-Nine.'
16 R: Ooo::[hhhhh ((groaning voice)).
17 M: [Heh heh HEH heh heh. It's .hhhhh-it's right up there. Hhhhhh.
18 ((water stops running))
19 R: Y'know you have a certain voice that you use when you joke about things.
20 ((crackling paper bag)) Kinda like this ironic joking voice. ((Silverware clinking
21 on plate))
22 M: A-really?
23 R: Like when you just said those titles, you had that ironic voice going on.

24 ((crackling paper bag))
25 M: Mmmmm. I love it when the chips make the bag turn clear. ((ironic voice))
26 R: ^That's gross.^
27 (5.0) ((crackling bag))
28 R: Umm. They're very beautiful!
29 M: Yeah. well the lilies [smelled so-so]
30 R: [and they have] the-they have the stuff that helps keeps
31 them alive longer=
32 M: =Yeah I guess these ones are more delicate but=
33 R: =and [the lilies DO smell good.
34 M: [the lilies smelled so good and these were [just so pretty and they didn't ()
35 R: [I LOVE orchids. They ARE
36 TOTALLY Thailand=
37 M: =Yeah, that's what I [thought
38 R: [Ohhh orchids. Thank you. You're very thoughtful.((paper
39 rattling)) ((In a childish voice:)) Very very thoughtful. Sometimes you
40 surpr-hhh-ise me.

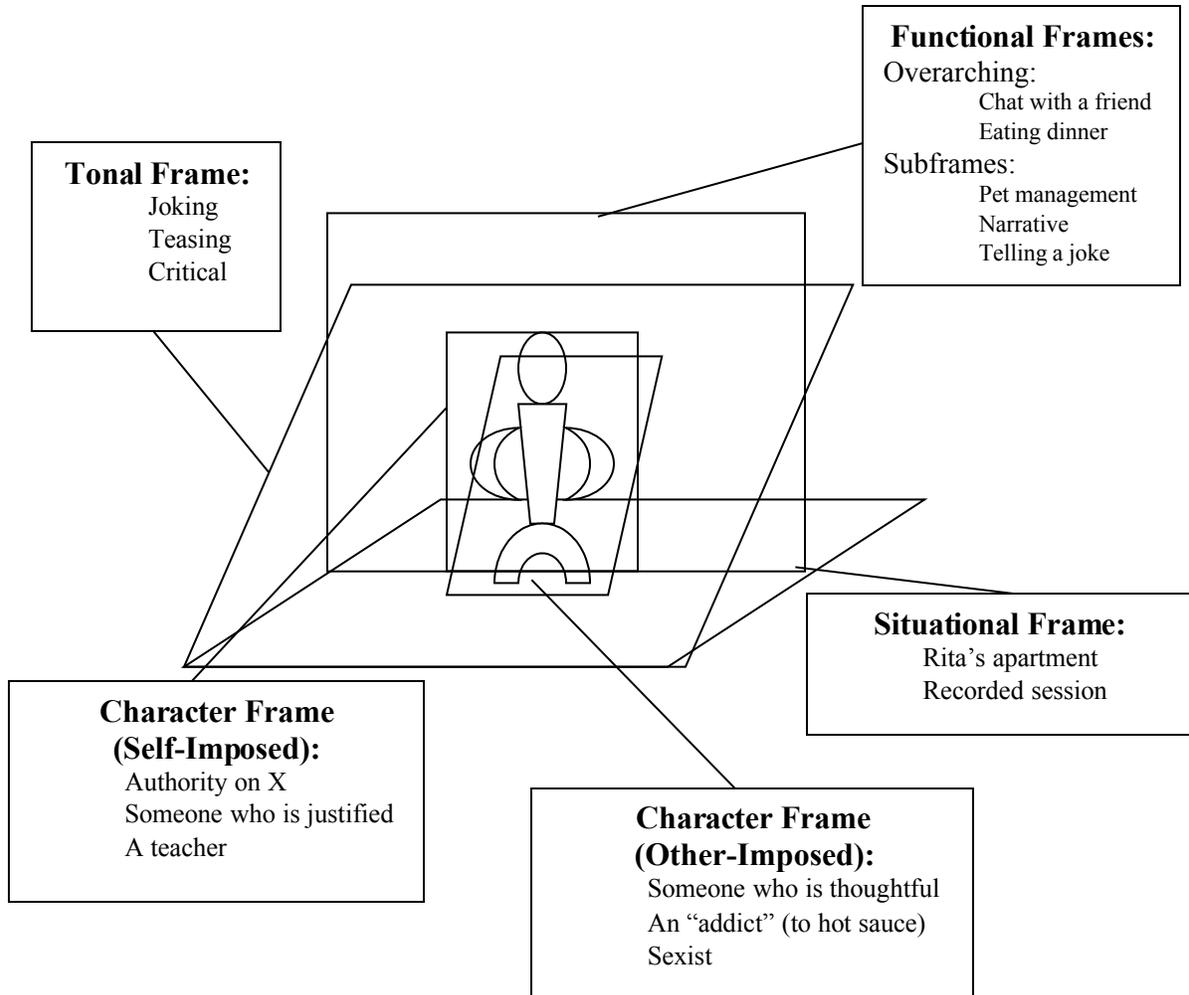
Here, we first see them talking about an online spoof newspaper, *The Onion*, in lines 1-4. Then Rita shifts her footing and uses pet talk in lines 5 and 7, while Martin continues to talk about *The Onion* headline (in line 6). Next, Rita switches topics to talking about the flowers Martin brought and how she needs to put them in water (lines 8 and 10). Martin returns to the topic of the headline in line 11, and Rita (line 12) cuts him off, saying she doesn't want Martin to tell her because she wants to read it herself. Martin then tells her that the headline is similar to (i.e., "right up there with") some past *Onion* headlines in lines 15-17, and Rita groans at the joke in line 16. Rita then switches into a critical frame (lines 19-24), initiating a meta-discussion about Martin's "ironic voice," and then Martin subsequently shifts frames and jumps into talking about food, mentioning that he likes his nacho chips greasy (line 25). Rita orients to his comment by saying "that's gross" (line 26). After a pause, where we hear a crackling bag while Martin is eating his chips, Rita shifts again, going back to the topic of the flowers, commenting on how beautiful they are, and they discuss the flowers and Martin's thoughtfulness for several turns (lines 28-40). In discussing *The Onion*, both Martin and Rita characterize themselves as people who can appreciate irony, and Rita characterizes Martin as thoughtful for bringing the flowers and herself as an appreciative person by talking about how beautiful the flowers are.

Through the way in which Martin and Rita jump back and forth between several topics (*The Onion*, the food, and the flowers, interspersed with pet talk), we can see that it is impossible to look solely at adjacent turn pairs to fully understand the functional frames. We must look at the larger section of discourse to see how the conversation returns to the flowers and other topics, both of which were discussed multiple times throughout the one-hour recorded conversation. The flowers frame overlaps and alternates with the food frame and with the *Onion* frame, and the pet management frame is interspersed throughout all the other frames.

Tonal frames are also shown to vary throughout Transcript B. We can see the sing-songy tone Rita has in lines 2-3, which probably indicates playfulness. She then shifts to pet talk in lines 5-7. Later, in lines 38-40, she has a childish voice (which seems to be a form of flirtation) while thanking Martin for being thoughtful and telling him he sometimes surprises her. Meanwhile, Martin has a joking, ironic tone for the entire beginning of the excerpt, while discussing the *Onion* headlines (lines 1-15). Rita mentions his tone explicitly, pointing out that he has a specific "joking or ironic voice" (lines 19-24). Martin also has an ironic voice when talking about his greasy chips in line 25. In this way, we can see the two interactants shifting in and out of differing tonal frames.

They are not operating within the same tonal frame as one another, but they understand what the other means and are generally aligned with their co-constructed characterizations of themselves and one another. We can visualize the various frames simultaneously occurring during Martin and Rita's conversation in an overlapping and multivariate framework of frames (see Figure 2, which includes frames from other data not included here).

FIGURE 2
Different Types of Frames: Martin & Rita's Conversation



The multiple layers of framing that we see in the data demonstrate the complex ways in which people communicate and the many conceptual frames being attended to by interactants at any given time. Our ability to multi-task and attend to various frames at once is truly amazing.

Since doing this analysis several years ago, I have moved into much more in-depth methods of discourse analysis, but the foundation this research gave me has extended into my dissertation work. For this early exploration into the complexities of framing in spoken discourse, and for the subsequent interest in discourse analysis and the examination of human interaction I have since fostered, I owe many thanks to Leslie Beebe. She has been an inspiration in many life frames for me, including the professorial frame, the advisement frame, the motivational frame, and

the friendship frame.

REFERENCES

- Bateson, G. (1972). A theory of play and fantasy. *Steps to an ecology of mind* (pp. 177-193). Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Goffman, E. (1997a). Frame analysis: From “Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience.” In C. Lemert & A. Branaman (Eds.), *The Goffman reader* (pp. 149-166). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Goffman, E. (1997b). Frame analysis of talk: From “Felicity’s Condition” (Chapter 13). In C. Lemert & A. Branaman (Eds.), *The Goffman reader* (pp. 167-200). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Gumperz, J. (1982). *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hutchby, I., & Wooffitt, R. (1998). *Conversation analysis: Principles, practices, and applications*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Hymes, D. (1971). *On communicative competence*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don’t think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Levinson, S. C. (1998). Putting linguistics on a proper footing: Explorations in Goffman’s concepts of participation. In P. Drew & A. Wootton (Eds.), *Exploring the interaction order* (pp. 161-227). Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Tannen, D. (1993). What’s in a frame? Surface evidence for underlying expectations. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Framing in discourse* (pp. 14-56). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tannen, D., & Wallat, C. (1993). Interactive frames and knowledge schemas in interaction: Examples from a medical examination/interview. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Framing in discourse* (pp. 57-76). New York: Oxford University Press.

APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

(adapted from Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998)

(0.5)	Indicates a time gap in tenths of a second
(.)	Indicates a pause of less than two-tenths of a second
=	Indicates latching between utterances
[]	Indicate adjacent lines of concurrent speech to show overlapping talk
.hh	Indicates speaker in-breath
hh.	Indicates speaker out-breath
(())	Indicate non-verbal activity
-	Indicates a sharp cut-off of the prior word or sound
:	Indicates that the speaker has elongated the prior sound or letter
!	Indicates animated or emphatic tone
()	Indicates an unclear fragment

.	Indicates a stopping fall in tone
,	Indicates a 'continuing' slightly rising intonation
?	Indicates a rising inflection
*	Indicates 'croaky' pronunciation
<u>xxxx</u>	Indicates speaker emphasis
XXXX	Indicates a section of speech noticeably louder than that surrounding it
^ ^	Indicates a section of speech noticeably quieter than that surrounding it

Rebekah J. Johnson is a doctoral student in the Applied Linguistics Program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include family interaction, identity construction, gender and language, and classroom discourse, as examined through the discourse analytic methods of interactional sociolinguistics and conversation analysis.