

2017

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Recommended Citation

Krippendorff, K. (2017). Three Concepts to Retire. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 41 (1), 92-99.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2017.1291281>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Annals of the International Communication Association* on 2017, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23808985.2017.1291281>

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Keywords

discourse, metaphor, entailments, message content, power, framing

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Three concepts to retire

Klaus Krippendorff¹

Keywords: Discourse; Metaphor; Entailments; Message content; Power; Framing

The history of scientific discourse is full of concepts that surged in popularity, came to be taken for granted, but faded away – not necessarily totally: Alchemical, astrological, spiritual, and animistic explanations still populate the discourses of small communities.

I agree with Elihu Katz that it might serve communication scholarship not to wait for centuries until worthless concepts reveal themselves as such and instead actively reflect on what we should do without. Such an effort could speed up the evolution of our discourse and understanding of our rapidly changing world.

Elihu mentions several reasons for nominating concepts for retirement. I like to add another to his list: Concepts that may well be popular in everyday talk about communication but mindlessly using them in our scholarly discourse limits our ability to recognize what they do, unwittingly imposing constraints on our research questions, and reproducing or serve existing and potentially oppressive social institutions. Let me focus on three concepts, dear to current communication scholarship: message content, power, and framing.

Message content

Lasswell, one of the earliest advocates of communication scholarship, suggested that content is the answer to the question of *what* is said. He contextualized it in his model of communication: “Who, says *what*, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect” (1948), but abandoned that context by suggesting that the five components of his model posed separate questions that communication researchers should answer by means of distinct analytical techniques. Content analysis was to address what is being said independent of the other components of his model. It is telling that he provided no definition or explanation of what “*what*” referred to. Incidentally in the same year, Berelson and Lazarsfeld (1948) wrote their pioneering book on content analysis, subsequently published by Berelson (1952). They defined “Content analysis (a)s a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (1952, p. 12). Minus the scientific qualifications expected of almost all research techniques, their definition in essence equates content with what content analysts analyze. It takes the concept of content as obvious and not worthy of critical attention.

I am suggesting that these early communication scholars did not attend to their own use of language and many contemporary communication researchers still fail to distinguish their own discourse from how observed others talk of their communication practices. Common talk of what messages contain relies on the use of the well-known conduit (Reddy, 1979) or container (Krippendorff, 1993) metaphors, *without recognizing them as such*. I am suggesting that our scholarly discourse should be regarded as meta-communicational accounts of the context in

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which everyday communication occurs and is explained. By not recognizing this difference, we are reproducing what we ought to analyze.

To be clear, metaphors are linguistic tropes as are metonymies, analogies, and hyperboles, to name but a few. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's brief definition, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (1980, p. 5). Evidence of metaphors in language is found when present concerns are talked of, experienced, and acted upon in terms of vocabulary from a distinctly different empirical source domain. Metaphors are compelling to the extent they succeed in suggesting structural resemblance between the source of their vocabulary and present concerns. Consistent use of this vocabulary weaves experiences from that source domain into conceptualizations of present concerns and unknowingly erases its prior conceptions. Unlike analogies, which explicate their logical constituents – A is like B as C is like D – metaphors render the consequences of their use – where these experiences come from and what they replace – largely unnoticeable to their users.

Accordingly, talk *about message content* inevitably invokes structural resemblances between the domain of containers and that of messages. Bottles hold fluids, packages keep their contents safe, envelopes contain letters, and personal diaries enable their authors to recover something they had previously put into words. The verb containing and all of its near synonyms like holding, having, conveying, carrying, transmitting, getting, and extracting render messages as containers of information, meanings, even insights.

Aboutness always directs speakers' attention to phenomena outside of them. When we – Lasswell, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and many contemporary content analysts – write about what is said or written, we are not only subscribing to a representational theory of language, we cannot help but ignore what our own use of language *does* to our perception. Employing the common container metaphor in our theories of communication makes the analysis of communication easier but only at the expense of recognizing its epistemological *entailments*. The first entailment, already mentioned, is our inability to reflect on the implications of our own discourse.

The second entailment is the objectification of what messages contain. If a given message is audible or readable, hence real, so must be what it contains, holds, conveys, or can be taken away from it. Consequently, the content of a container has to be the same for everyone. Indeed, in Berelson and Lazarsfeld's view, content analysis is to provide objective accounts of the content of messages – objective in the sense of being observer-independent, true for everyone, independently obtainable, and reproducible.

More often than not, people disagree on what messages convey. However, containers do not provide for this possibility. A bottle may contain milk or wine but not both, nor milk for one and wine for someone else. The third entailment of using content metaphors is the presumption that the content of messages affords only one correct reading. Disagreements on what a message conveys is due to incompetent receivers or mistakes. Accepting that entailment calls for standards of correctness. Content analysts tend to consult established dictionaries or build such dictionaries into text analysis software, for example in Philip Stone's (et al., 1966) *General Inquirer*. Scholars of literature, keen to avoid their work to be dismissed as subjective, have turned to the causality of its origin. When focusing on who gave form to what is being analyzed, it makes sense to view authors as the ultimate authority of what their writing contains. After all, they are the ones who put their intentions into words and what they had in mind is what qualified

readers have to take away from them. The consequence of embracing the container metaphors is evident in much of literary scholarship which analyzes what authors had in mind.

Of course, nobody can possibly know what Shakespeare intended to say. Had someone asked him at his time, his answer would have merely added to his writing and not offered us privileged insights into his mind either. Yet, the unquestionable inaccessibility of authors' mind does not prevent scholars of literature to conceptualize its content in their authors' terms. Absent ways to corroborate what authors put into words, literary scholars have developed qualitative methods to legitimize such inferences. The academic standing of their discourse substitutes for the missing evidence. To the extent content analysts use container metaphors in explanations of what they are analyzing, these questionable justifications apply to them as well.

To be fair, there are critical literary scholars who reject the use of the container metaphor, suggesting instead that the meaning of texts is created by their readers (Rosenblatt, 1978). Hermeneutics – named after Hermes, the mythological Greek deity and messenger of the gods – morphed from studying what mythological texts contained into a science of reading (Gadamer, 1975), including critically (Habermas, 1991), and non-representationally (Rorty, 1979). This is my conception as well.

These epistemologically questionable entailments of the content metaphor have lead me to argue for some time that the use of this metaphor should be retired from our scholarly discourse of communication. For me (Krippendorff, 2013, pp. 27-35), messages do not contain anything on their own. Texts do not speak and cannot cause anything without readers interpreting them as such. Copying documents or sending emails merely reproduces strings of characters in another medium, hopefully preserving their readability, but nothing else. Information is never found inside electronic signals. To make a difference, they have to be interpreted as information by members of a community, who assume to speak the same language. Reading, writing, and interpreting texts undeniably requires acquired literacy, interpersonal and cultural competencies, and the ability to take into account the expectations of how others might read and interact with the texts in question.

Communication scholarship that is governed by container metaphors cannot but ignore these constitutive competencies. It authorizes distant authors, constructs obedient audiences, celebrates animistic conceptions of texts speaking to us, promotes deterministic conceptions, and renders incomprehensible the dynamic world of communication of which we are a part.

As substitutes for conceptions of message content, I am suggesting the use of more specific human-centered verbs which acknowledges the imagination that reading and writing stimulates and the creativity that emerges in conversations, including reading, making sense of, interpreting, articulating, inferring, narrating, conversing, collaborating, negotiating, and interacting.

Power (in social contexts)

For Michael Foucault (1980), the foremost theoretician of power in the context of society, power is omnipresent, above or outside the realm of human control. Power is what moves everything, whether productively driving desirable events or oppressively constraining developments. Talk of power summons causal explanations of social phenomena.

The communication research literature did not escape the seductiveness of the concept of power. In the early 1950s, Stanley Schachter characterized “communication (a)s the mechanism through which power is exerted” (1951, p. 191). Talk of the media as powerful agents is

widespread. Numerous publications are titled “The Power of X,” where X stands for all kinds of abstractions that are presumed to energize actions or compel obedience: words, symbols, elites, governments, corporations, institutions, and ideologies. X is assumed to control the material, economic, cognitive, or cultural conditions of whole populations. Even the well-intended distinction between “power over” which focuses on the cause of inevitable obedience, and “power of” which emphasizes the energizing of causal agents, renders power as an impersonal mover.

Gregory Bateson (1972/2000, pp. 494-495) vehemently opposed such accounts on epistemological grounds. He argued his opposition by discussing the common claim that “power corrupts,” suggesting that what does corrupt is not power but the *idea of power*. It corrupts most rapidly those who believe in it, talk of it, and seek to amass what they believe it is, but does not affect those who don’t. For him, the *myth* of power is self-validating epistemological lunacy which leads inevitably to various sorts of disasters. He did not elaborate on what makes the myth of power so compelling, but his distinction between power and the idea of power directs us to its metaphorical base.

Obviously, “power” is a word. Several discourses – logic, mathematics, statistics, and physics – use it in very different senses. None of its many referents possess materiality. We have no trouble mentioning or writing the word but cannot observe what it means. Even where physical power is experienced, for example, in the form of violence, bodily injury, or imprisonment, experiences of this kind tend to be preceded by the use of language, explaining justifying or condemning it. Social scientific discourses concerning social power tend to employ vocabularies from the natural sciences. In physics, power is the rate at which energy is expended to overcome resistance. It is not surprising that Foucault and other social theorists of power rarely talk of power without mentioning resistance. Thermodynamics theorizes energy to flow irreversibly from where it is to where it is not. In the discourse of the social sciences, power is assumed to result from unequal distributions of resources. It emanates from those in command of them and forces those lacking them to do what they would not do otherwise – a one-way causality.

One entailment of the social scientific use of power metaphors is the need to search for and find, highlight, if not construct all kinds of inequalities, just to justify the conception of unidirectional causal influences. Ellen Langer (1983, p. 15) lists numerous resources that have played a role in metaphorical explanations of power: money, property, muscles, beauty, charisma, knowledge, and privilege. It is noteworthy that the sources of power on Langer’s list are all difficult to acquire or to overcome and theorizing them encourages accounts of the inevitability of power.

The apparent inevitability of power points to the second entailment of this metaphor: the objectification of power, the conviction that human beings have nothing to do with it. For Foucault power is inescapably present in “discursive regimes,” “technologies,” and “systems.” He depicts authors as ventriloquized by the discursive regimes of their times (with rare exceptions, including himself). That Foucault’s powerful agents, including the list of resources of power provided by Langer are abstractions further attests to the metaphorical nature of power. Obviously, abstractions cannot exist outside of human cognition. They emerge in human communication and cannot make a difference without linguistically competent participants enacting them.

A third entailment, common to all physical metaphors, is their constitution of determinisms. Social theories of power, published and convincingly communicated to their stakeholders, do not merely highlight but could actually be implemented and encourage very stable inequalities and institute the inevitable consequences needed for the power metaphor to make sense.

As suggested by Bateson, theorizing power is a self-validating lunacy, a pathology of communication. My answer to the question of what makes the use of the power metaphor so compelling is its fourth entailment: It simplifies the analysis of communication by excluding, making alternative explanations inaccessible, as all metaphors do.

I am suggesting we take three steps toward retiring the concept of power from the discourse of communication scholarship. The first is to acknowledge the discursive nature of power. To do so, we need to preserve the distinction between talking about power and analyzing that talk, between the language of those who employ the power metaphor in the process of acquiring and exerting influence and our own discourse in terms of which we hope to understand and theorize such communicative practices.

The second step involves recognizing the metaphorical nature of language. Awareness of how metaphors work enables us to examine the entailments of how observed communicators talk of their practices. However, our ability to understand the entailments of their use of power metaphors means that we cannot afford using them in our own discourse, except in quotation marks. As a communication scholar, I am suggesting that influence never is a one-way process. It presupposes acceptance. Submission to authorities and attribution of their institutional legitimacies is what invites influence. Even individual empowerment is intrinsically linked to the affordances that other communicators grant a speaker. Adopting the power metaphor in our own discourse would severely limit our understanding of communication. It would prevent us from conceptualizing the range of possibilities that communication processes can make available.

The third step derives from embracing the consequences of publishing our communication scholarship. After all, publishing communication theories, even only in the form of small propositions, communicates communication and has the potential of changing how their readers or stakeholders communicate with one another. If the communication theories we propose are socially relevant, they should encourage debates. They could face criticism as well as embrace and make a difference in the lives of their stakeholders. Thus, it is not inconceivable that the compelling communication of theories of power could create, support and legitimize rigid social structures and potentially oppressive regimes that curb human communication.

Therefore, my recommendation is to not merely retire the use of metaphors of power in our scholarly discourse but actively challenge their use in diverse social contexts (Krippendorff, 1989). Popular claims of power relationships can always be questioned, denied, rearticulated, ignored, undermined, and invalidated. Paolo Freire (2000) has demonstrated that education of the economically deprived can make existing inequalities ineffective, and Gene Sharp (2010) has given us strategies that have proven to challenge the claimed powers of dictatorships.

Framing

Gregory Bateson (1972, pp. 184-193) may have been the one who introduced the concept of framing into social science literature when exploring the meaning of declaring “this is play.” Such an utterance shifts the interpretation of subsequent interactions from being serious to being interpreted as hypothetical and playful, as a game. He considered “this is play” to be a meta-

communicative instruction analogue to crossing a frame distinguishes a picture and the wall on which it hangs. To him, a frame marks the difference between two realities, two distinct sets of behaviors, much as mathematical set theory depicts its objects in Venn-diagrams. In his conception, framing is the process of moving from one reality to another. He generalized such shifts to other situations, for example, to what therapists are expected to do when helping their clients to replace dysfunctional accounts of their lives to livable narratives. He recognized that we are always in one frame or another, mostly unknowingly, until meta-communicative instructions lead us into another reality in which different rules apply. Bateson also observed that other mammals respond to signs for reframing their behaviors from serious to play and that schizophrenics have difficulties reframing their interpretations.

While Bateson used the metaphor of a frame to illustrate that meta-communicative interventions and the realities they shift reside on different logically levels, the word framing has since been adopted by a variety of discourses, acquiring other meanings, largely losing its reference to linguistic communications.

Erving Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis* theorized the psychological causes of social perceptions, how different ways of organizing experiences structure individual participation in society. Unlike Bateson, who took framing to be a communicative action, Goffman considered frames as alternative ways for experiences to become meaningful. He observed that most misunderstandings result from people bringing incompatible frames into their conversations. He elaborated the framing metaphor by distinguishing different manifestations of it: "fabrications," "keyings," "frame breaks," "misframing," and, of course, "frame disputes." His distinctions focused attention to different forms of cognition and its social consequences but left out what created them.

Well before mass communication researchers adopted the concept of framing to account for media effects, Bernard Cohen (1963) proposed a distinction that anticipated how metaphors work. He observed that the media "may not be successful ... in telling people *what* to think, but (are) stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*" (my italics). This observation suggested that media effects frame perceptions and actions without increasing awareness of how and why this happened. McCombs et al. (2005, et al. 1972) considered framing to be part of agenda setting theory, which claims that the issues discussed in public are the result of what the mass media chose to publicize. Others, Scheufele (1999, et al. 2011) for example, saw framing as an explanation of how media structure audience experiences. Undoubtedly, the deliberate framing of public issues can have profound public implications. For example, the "right to work" law that Republicans in the U.S. congress introduced so named to garner public support while hiding the intent to bust unions for the benefit of large corporations. Advertising has made this kind of framing of products and services its business, and it worked there.

The concept of framing also entered the literature of decision making in economics. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979) explored how different articulations of the same quantitative data affect individual preferences. For example, the framing of a policy's effectiveness in terms of the proportion of lives that could be saved was found to be more acceptable than framing its effectiveness in terms of how few people may die. Here framing has to do with the attitudinal effects of alternative ways of describing data.

Robert Entman (1993) called framing “a scattered conceptualization” and “a fractured paradigm.” I agree. However, his redefinition of framing as the process of selection and salience of information provided by the media does not come close to explaining what it takes to shift communicators’ perception from one reality to another.

As these examples suggest, much of the literature on framing describes the social consequences of alternative perceptions. This is far removed from the more general idea of framing that Bateson discussed. He illustrated the sequentiality of communication by reminding us how meta-communicative instructions can cause a shift in subsequent interpretations. But he also alluded to the consequences of other communications. I would say that sequentiality is implicated in all communicational practices. Acts of communication have consequences for subsequent accounts of behavior and communicative responses, most of which unrecognized in the literature on framing. For example, any good narrative tends to start with an abstract that guides its listeners’ attention through a story, much like a newspaper headline suggests how to read an article. User instructions of technological devices spell out not only how to handle them but also how to talk of them. As John Austin (1962) taught us, the performance of speech acts structure, often quite radically, the realities that follow them, including what we can say of them. Uttering declarations alter what follows linguistically, behaviorally, and relationally (Searle, 1969), not just perceptually, for instance, when pronouncing two people as married, declaring war, or identifying the winner in a competition. Last but not least are metaphors. As defined and exemplified above, introducing one metaphor in a conversation rather than another unwittingly structures how a present concern is perceived, talked of and enacted. Metaphors are not meta-communicational but prototypical initiators of framing.

I propose that we replace the largely psychological construct of framing by embedding it in the sequentiality of discursive interactions and observable behaviors. Meta-communicative instructions, introductions, speech acts, and linguistic tropes are just a few examples. We have some theories of how their interactive use shapes current concerns and actions. Observing the sequentiality of such and other communicative forms gives us analyzable data to explain the continuous construction, destruction, and reconstruction of the social realities we live in.

Coda

It would serve us well to acknowledge that scientific discourses develop in communication within scientific communities. Unlike the discourse of the natural sciences, our scholarly discourse seeks to understand how communication is practiced elsewhere. However, I see no reason not to apply our own insights and theories of communication reflexively to our own practices. The convenience of simplicity notwithstanding, it would not serve us well to adopt the very concepts that observed others commonly use to account for their communication practices. We would merely reproduce the institutional constraints and pathologies of communication they impose, in the case of metaphors, unwittingly limiting the scope of communication research.

Moreover, publishing the communication theories we propose communicates communication and has a good chance of affecting how the stakeholders of our scholarship subsequently communicate. This is not to suggest that we can or should control what others do with our research results or refrain from using metaphors creatively in our theories. However, we need to be reflective to the extent possible of the communication practices that our discourse could facilitate or constrain elsewhere. This calls for our research to be socially relevant and on us to be open to be held publically accountable for what our scholarship does.

Critically examining the social implications of our discourse and revising its vocabulary accordingly should be a continuous project of communication scholarship.

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