

***Talk like a leader:  
Framing personal experience in the executive academic context***

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Executive education constitutes a unique academic environment, wherein students who are already experts in their respective fields spend a year or two surrounded by peers learning new ways of talking that reflect academic engagement with lived experience. Leadership in this context involves orienting to existing professional knowledge “academically” and while students are encouraged to use their own experiences to support and legitimize their emerging identities as Georgetown trained leaders, they are evaluated on how this is displayed through language (both written and verbal). Additionally, the mechanics of these “ways of talking” are taught and learned implicitly.

Using interactional sociolinguistics, we consider how leadership gets negotiated linguistically in this context. Specifically, we explore the language used to negotiate orientation to academia, literature and research, focusing on use of key linguistic features used to establish frames in this context: referring expressions, intertextuality, jokes, and narratives, which signal moments of mismatch in expectation. Anchoring in on the analytical framework of “framing,” we illuminate moments of misunderstanding that are both analytically rich and have the potential to be educationally illuminating.

For example, in the executive classroom, students and professors verbally display that they rank sources of knowledge differently in terms of validity, the former often using personal experience as leaders as a basis for belief, while the latter call into focus the source of knowledge through use of referring expressions such as “according to Tyler,” demonstrating reliance on peer-reviewed published research and expert findings. While this linguistic modeling on the part of professors displays desired intertextual behavior on the part of professors, this negotiation occurs implicitly, subtly, resulting in a mismatch of frames further evidenced in student questions like “What does the research say about X?” where professors would seem to be calling into focus the role of research as process, but students orient to research as product.

This project draws from an ongoing ethnography of Georgetown University’s McDonough School of Business, focusing on a cohort pursuing an Executive master’s degree in leadership (EML). Data are drawn from audio and video recordings as well as participant observation of a cohort throughout the course of their masters program, which culminates in an independent research project. Our analysis is also informed by the larger ethnography, which includes other cohorts of this program as well as participant observation with undergraduates and MBAs.

First used in linguistics by Bateson (1955, 1972), framing describes the process by which individuals come to understand the intended message or meanings behind what they say. In everyday life, frames allow us to identify jokes, arguments, lectures or reprimands

without explicitly asking “what is happening here?” (Goffman, 1974). Once identified by participants in an interaction, frames prescribe how people ought to behave within that context (Gameson 1992): “If this is budget planning meeting, be prepared to outline your divisions needs.” “If this a lecture, I can ask topical questions at transition points.” In interactional sociolinguistics, Tannen’s (1993) edited volume stands as an example of the importance of alignment or ramifications of mismatch of frames affecting communication in institutional settings. Framing as an effective communication tool for successful leaders has also been covered in literature aimed at an organization audience (Fairhurst 2005, 2011).

The lexical representation of concepts such as “research” or “think” used to evaluate research, as well as the way information is verbally linked to presented evidence all serve as linguistic devices by which both groups of participants claim authority as leaders, however, one group’s way of displaying leadership can be misinterpreted through another group’s frame s as doing the exact opposite. For example, a professor who cites too much research can seem to be at best “out of touch” with the way that things really work in the business world, but at worst insecure – presenting evidence in the form of academic studies because their voice cannot stand alone. When such claims to authority go unrecognized, it cements misunderstanding. Additionally, it can trigger what Bateson (1972) labels “complementary schismogenesis” where the response to the apparent misunderstanding in interacting with the other style triggers a greater use of the very features that triggered the misunderstanding in the first place, resulting of course in increased misunderstanding.

While a highly transferrable skill, the process of identifying frames and using them to communicate effectively is taught implicitly in the EML classroom (as indeed in many classrooms). In this paper, we present three cases of missed opportunities of “lessons” in framing not recognized as such. We discuss the ramifications of not discussing framing in each of these contexts, and consider whether these cases represent missed opportunities to learn and cultivate valuable professional skills.

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