

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Figurative Framing: Shaping Public Discourse Through Metaphor, Hyperbole, and Irony

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*Framing is an important concept in communication, yet many framing studies set out to develop frames relevant to only one issue. We expand framing theory by introducing figurative framing. We posit that figurative language types like metaphor, hyperbole and irony are important in shaping public discourse, because these figures contain important linguistic and conceptual content about the issue under discussion. We first explicate the role of each individual figure (metaphor, hyperbole, and irony) in the framing of important societal issues. Then, we focus on complex figurative frames (combinations of metaphor, hyperbole, and/or irony). The article concludes with a research agenda, connecting figurative framing to the four key processes in framing research (frame building, frame setting, individual-level effects, and feedback loop).*

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Framing is an important concept in explaining how media content affects its consumers (cf. Borah, 2011; de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012; Scheufele, 1999). Many framing studies, however, identify frames that are specific for only one issue (Hertog & McLeod, 2001), which has led to a call for new framing theories that transcend specific issues (Borah, 2011). In the current article, we aim to answer that call by building a bridge between framing theory and research on figurative language. We argue that figurative language can be used as a framing type to which we refer as figurative framing. We posit that figurative framing is a theoretical perspective that can explain framing across a variety of societal issues, and can thereby serve as a valuable addition to framing theory.

In traditional framing theory, framing is defined as “select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a

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way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 53). In doing so, a frame is typically defined as consisting of two elements (Joris, d’Haenens, & Van Gorp, 2014, p. 609): (a) framing devices which are “clearly perceptible elements in a text or specific linguistic structures such as metaphors” and (b) reasoning devices which are the (latent) information in a text through which the problem, cause, evaluation, and/or treatment is implied. In this divide, “framing device” thus refers to the linguistic packaging of a frame, while “reasoning device” refers to the frame’s conceptual content.

The novel perspective in this article is that key figurative language types (metaphor, hyperbole, and irony) work as framing devices (by serving as linguistic packaging cues) *and* as reasoning devices (by containing important conceptual content). Thereby, we challenge the traditional perspective seeing figurative language primarily as linguistic framing devices, and expand traditional framing theory. Consider the figurative language framing genetically modified food as “Frankenfood” (Hellsten, 2003) or the Euro Covenant as “Hotel California: You can check in, but never leave” (de Vries, 2012). These frames are created by using metaphor, hyperbole, and/or irony: The Frankenfood frame contains both a metaphor (referring to genetically modified food as a man-made monster), and hyperbole (extreme account of science spiraling out of control). Similarly, the Euro frame is metaphoric (the Euro is compared to *Hotel California*), hyperbolic (exiting the Euro is seen as never possible), and ironic (in the Eagles’ song, the luxury *Hotel California* is actually a nightmarish place). In different ways, these frames thus figuratively present a particular problem definition and color the topic under discussion.

In the present article, we first present an account as to why and how figurative language types contain linguistic and conceptual content, and provide empirical evidence from a variety of subdisciplines in communication and media research for our claims. Second, we discuss complex figurative frames (i.e., combinations of metaphor, hyperbole, and/or irony). Third, we conclude with a research agenda for further research into this area, and present a set of empirically testable hypotheses to further the study of figurative framing.

### **How figurative language contains linguistic and conceptual content**

The power of figurative language devices like metaphor, hyperbole and irony in persuading an audience has been acknowledged since the days of antiquity (Quintilian, transl., 1959). In such classic treatises, figurative devices are typically treated as ornamental language which add rhetorical flourish to texts or speeches. In these works, figurative devices are typically seen as “artful deviations” (e.g., McQuarrie & Mick, 1996) in that they involve a deviation from the standard, nonfigurative (i.e., literal) meaning. From such a perspective, figurative language is seen as a stylistic device that does not involve conceptual content. This implies that replacing a type of figure with its nonfigurative (“literal”) counterpart may make the message style less appealing, but would

not substantially alter the message's (conceptual or propositional) content. Thus, a figurative message would then have the same message content as a literal message, only presented in a more appealing style.

Most communication-scientific perspectives on framing foreground such classic stylistic properties of figurative devices like metaphor, hyperbole, and irony. In the words of Gamson and Modigliani (1989, p. 3), they can be seen as "condensing symbols" in that they can provide a position of a certain political actor "in shorthand." De Landtsheer, De Vries, and Vertessen (2008, p. 222) categorize the figurative device of metaphor as "a specific type of sound bite." In such ways, figurative language is conceptualized as a "framing device" (e.g., Deprez & Raeymaeckers, 2010; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Joris et al., 2014), meaning that figurative language primarily operates on a linguistic level (referring to *how* something is said), but not on the conceptual level (referring to *what* is said).

In this article, we argue that, in political framing, figurative language contains both important linguistic and conceptual content. In explaining how these dimensions interact in framing, we integrate literature on figurative language from the fields of cognitive linguistics and social psychology into the communication-scientific literature on framing. The former fields have a long research tradition arguing how figurative language is a strong carrier of conceptual content (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003; Ortony, 1979/1993). This shift in thinking about figurative language started in the late 1970s and 1980s and has been labeled as the "cognitive turn" (Steen, 2011). This cognitive turn opened up the possibility to conceptualize figurative language as a framing and as a reasoning device for communication-scientific theories on framing. After all, when figurative language contains conceptual content, different figurative language types fulfill one or more of the important functions of framing as distinguished by Entman (1993): foregrounding a particular problem definition, cause, evaluation and/or solution. The cognitive turn has been most influential in the study of metaphor, hyperbole and irony, which is why we focus on these three figures (Gibbs & Colston, 2012). Because this cognitive turn was first made for metaphor, and later for hyperbole and irony, we discuss the various figures, and their connection to framing and reasoning devices, in that order.

### **Metaphor: Cross-domain mapping**

Metaphors are cross-domain mappings, which means that information from a source domain is mapped onto a target domain (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). In order to qualify as metaphoric, the source and target domain have to be sufficiently remote so that the leap from source to target contains two distinct domains. In fact, for metaphors to be highly apt, the similarity between source and target domain (called "between-domain similarity") should be as low as possible. At the same time, the place of both source and target within their respective domains (called "within-domain similarity") should be as high as possible (Gibbs, 2008). This level of aptness is an important predictor of the success of the metaphor (Chiappe, Kennedy, & Chiappe, 2003). The persuasive power of metaphors has been attested in a meta-analysis,

showing that metaphors can be very persuasive in impacting the audience (Sopory & Dillard, 2002).

In the 1980s, the perspective of metaphors as being only linguistic changed when Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003) introduced Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which had two major claims. The first claim is that metaphors in language typically cluster in larger conceptual structures (“conceptual metaphors”). For instance, linguistic expressions like “his ideas have finally come to *fruition*,” “that’s a *budding* theory,” or “physics has many *branches*” all share the conceptual metaphorical structure comparing ideas to plants (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003, p. 47). Furthermore, a conceptual metaphor often implies a story and/or event sequence enabling metaphors to function as reasoning devices. For instance, the conceptual metaphor comparing ideas to plants includes the latent information that ideas are living organisms, which start out small but can develop and grow when they are well cared for, but can also die, either prematurely (“nipped in the bud”) or when their time has come.

Such reasoning devices can even be activated by one specific linguistic metaphor. The linguistic expression “tax relief,” for instance, implies the conceptual metaphor of “taxation is a burden,” defining the issue of taxation as a physical weight that bears down upon the people who have to carry it around (i.e., the taxpayers), in which the burden is the cause of the negative sentiment (Lakoff, 1996/2002). The example also suggests a negative evaluation of the policy of taxation, as taxation is mainly conceptualized as a nuisance for the citizens having to pay taxes (even though taxes are used to fund very useful public facilities like schools, roads or the utilities grid). Finally, the metaphor suggests how politicians should deal with taxation: they should alleviate the burden for taxpayers, and strive to reduce taxes (“tax relief”).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003) argue that conceptual metaphors are elements of cognition, which may be triggered by language, yet are also independent of language (see also Gibbs, 2008 for an overview). Empirical evidence for this claim has been accumulated in social psychology, where scholars have tried to activate conceptual metaphors in the brain without using language. For instance, a famous series of experiments has focused on the conceptual metaphor “affection is warmth,” which conceptualizes interpersonal affection as physical heat (Williams & Bargh, 2008). In these experiments, participants feeling physically warm (by holding a cup with a hot beverage) generally judged others to have a more generous (“warmer”) personality than participants feeling physically cold (by holding a cup with an iced beverage). Similar results have been found for experimental studies tapping into conceptual metaphors with manipulations involving visual (e.g., Boot & Pecher, 2010), olfactory (e.g., Lee & Schwarz, 2012), and sensory (e.g., Hong & Sun, 2012) cues. These studies demonstrate that metaphor is not just a linguistic element, but also involves a dimension of thought.

The second claim of CMT is that conceptual metaphors are ubiquitous in thought around a wide range of (social) issues. Various studies show that metaphors are often used to discuss and conceptualize political topics such as EU politics (Musolff, 2000), financial reporting (Charteris-Black & Musolff, 2003), and immigration (Quinnsaat,

2014). Moreover, even some political frames that have already been widely discussed in the communications literature are metaphoric in nature. An example is the game frame, in which politics is metaphorically compared to a game (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012). That is, journalists who adopt the game frame talk about politics using metaphorical language to refer to either sports or war. This means that politicians are referred to either as athletes competing in a match or as military actors engaged on some field of battle. Using such language to talk about politics may serve to make political debates more exciting as well as more comprehensible (Aalberg et al., 2012; Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004).

While the game frame presents a general frame of reference to talk about politics (sometimes called a meta-frame, cf. Aalberg et al., 2012), subframes make the specific games played by politicians more explicit. One of these subframes is the horserace frame (Iyengar et al., 2004). The horserace frame is mostly limited to one particular political situation (i.e., elections), and presents the election as a horserace between contenders. Under the horserace frame, some contenders (i.e., political candidates) may take the lead early in the race (i.e., the campaign), but fall back later on. Other contenders may have a slow start, but gain momentum throughout the race. When the contenders approach the finish line (i.e., election date), some contenders may go neck-to-neck for the win, while others straggle behind and lose. Thus, metaphoric frames can be used to present a definition of very broad political issues (e.g., politics as a game) and to define specific topics and events (e.g., elections as a horserace).

Furthermore, more than one conceptual metaphor can often be found to describe a certain topic, opening up the possibility of presenting competing conceptual-metaphoric frames. For the domain of politics, Lakoff's (1996/2002) Theory of Moral Reasoning (TMR) presupposes that conservatives and liberals unconsciously build their worldviews around different conceptual metaphors about the state as a family. From the TMR perspective, conservatives and liberals prefer different (metaphoric) family values: conservatives think of the state as a strict father, in which morality is based on strength and moral authority; in contrast, liberals' worldview is based on a metaphorical model of the state as a nurturing parent, in which morality is based on empathy and compassion.

Such differences between a strict and nurturing parent morality can be found in typically conservative and liberal discourse on policy preferences for a variety of political issues (Lakoff, 1996/2002). For instance, for issues related to crime, the strict father metaphor would argue that crime can best be reduced by acting strongly and swiftly, e.g., by increasing sentences for offenders and by having more tight police control. In contrast, the nurturing parent metaphor would suggest that crime can best be solved through prevention, by tackling the underlying social causes. TMR presupposes similar differences between the strict and nurturing parent worldview for a wide range of heavily debated political issues, from taxation to abortion (Lakoff, 1996/2002). A number of recent empirical studies have confirmed one of TMR's key hypotheses, that conservatives use relatively more strict father morality metaphors

and that liberals use relatively more nurturing parent morality metaphors. Such differences in metaphor use between liberals and conservatives have been established in a variety of discourse situations such as political campaign materials (Moses & Gonzales, 2015; Ohl, Pfister, Nader, & Griffin, 2013), political speeches (Deason & Gonzales, 2012), and voter comments (McAdams et al., 2008). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that metaphor operates on both levels of framing and reasoning devices.

### **Hyperbole: Extreme exaggeration**

Classical perspectives on figurative language (e.g., Quintilian, 1959) typically make a distinction between schemes (figures focusing on regularity, e.g., rhyme and alliteration) and tropes (figures involving a change in meaning, e.g., metaphor, hyperbole). In these perspectives, metaphors cluster in the same group of rhetorical figures with other figures like hyperbole and irony. Yet, after the cognitive turn, scholars typically focus on only one of the figures. We argue that metaphors are not the only figures that can serve as both framing and reasoning devices, but that other figures (hyperbole and irony) can do so as well.

Hyperbole involves extreme exaggeration by describing something (an “ontological referent”) as larger than it really is. For instance, if you are late for a meeting with a friend, and this friend tells you that they “have been waiting *for ages*,” this statement contains an exaggeration of the waiting time. Some scholars refer to hyperbole as “extreme case formulation” (Norrick, 2004), implying that hyperbole is typically found at the very end of a semantic scale. Like metaphor, hyperbole is a pragmatic device which means that an utterance is only hyperbolic given a specific context (cf. Searle, 1978). That is, an utterance like “the biggest disaster of the 21st century” can be non-hyperbolic when for instance referring to the Asian Tsunami of 2004, but hyperbolic when referring to a loss in a sports match.

For instance, in 2013, Republican Ben Carson argued that the Affordable Care Act (ACA, known popularly as Obamacare) was “the worst thing that has happened in this nation [the USA] since slavery” (Sullivan, 2013). Such exaggerations can help to put a topic on the public agenda, thereby arousing interest in the topic. As such, using hyperbole can intensify a discussion by increasing message processing (Craig & Blankenship, 2011) or the emotional attitude attached to a subject (Claridge, 2010), which, in turn, can affect message persuasiveness (Craig & Blankenship, 2011). Furthermore, experimental evidence suggests that using hyperbole in political campaign materials can boost the impact of such campaign materials, especially for people who process these materials superficially (Weber & Wirth, 2014).

When hyperboles are repeated often, the exaggerated topic gets a place in the public debate that is different than when the topic is described without hyperbole. These functions of hyperbole have been most extensively studied in societal debates on (terrorist) threats. In such debates, using hyperbole to exaggerate the threat (i.e., “threat exaggeration”) can be a powerful rhetorical tool in persuading the public of the existence, importance and imminence of a certain threat (cf. Doig & Phythian, 2005;

Kaufmann, 2004). When speakers use this form of hyperbole, they frame a threat as being more imminent and/or dangerous than it actually is. For example, Kaufmann (2004) argues that the Bush Administration consistently exaggerated the alleged threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction in the public debate, which eventually gave the Administration enough policy support to start the Second Iraq War. This suggests that threat exaggeration is achieved by deliberately inflating the impact of objective figures and thus by deviating from objective truth. In a democracy where politicians are supposed to tell the truth, the use of threat exaggeration is, according to some scholars, a case for moral concern (Kaufmann, 2004). In this way, hyperboles could work as reasoning devices by giving certain elements within the existing frame added weight and focus in the discussion.

Furthermore, hyperboles can steer the discussion by limiting it to one topic or keeping the discussion firmly within either the positive or negative domain (cf. Snoeck Henkemans, 2013). For example, it is possible that people conclude that calling ACA “among the worst laws ever enacted by Congress” overstates the law’s negative impact, and that the negative evaluation should be mitigated (e.g., the law is fairly negative). This then still results in the law being evaluated in negative rather than positive terms. As such, hyperbolic frames work as reasoning devices in shaping a debate, by limiting the type of discussion about the topic (e.g., a discussion on the degree of badness of ACA instead of a discussion on whether ACA is bad or good). When the law had been implemented for about a year, the New York Times (2014) analyzed the impact of the law based on actual data, and found that the law had “largely succeeded in delivering on President Obama’s main promises,” suggesting that it had many positive effects. Thus, the hyperboles used changed the debate’s focus away from the real-life (positive) effects of implementing the ACA law.

### **Irony: Attacking or reinforcing established opinions**

Irony contains a literal evaluation of something that is contrary to what an individual aims to get across (Burgers, van Mulken, & Schellens, 2011). This implies that the intended evaluation of an ironic utterance (negative, positive) is contrary to the stated (“literal”) evaluation. An example is, after having proclaimed a policy initiative that turns out to be really bad, ironically exclaiming: “*Well, that was a great policy initiative.*” The difference between irony and hyperbole is thus that irony includes a reversal on a semantic scale (from positive to negative or vice versa) while hyperbole stays within the same evaluative domain (either positive or negative). Irony can positively affect attitudes about the text (Burgers, van Mulken, & Schellens, 2012) and speaker perception (Dews & Winner, 1995). In that way, irony can arouse interest in a particular topic or perspective, and be used as a way to communicate for instance politeness (Dews & Winner, 1995) or interpersonal aggression (Averbeck & Hample, 2008).

Some scholars posit that irony constitutes an attack on established expectancies or norms (e.g., Dori-Hacohen & Livnat, 2015; El Refaie, 2005; Ettema & Glasser, 1994;

Glasser & Ettema, 1993; Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Because irony explicates the original expectancy or norm of the (recent) past (e.g., *the policy initiative would be great*), it acknowledges the disconfirmation of the expectancy or norm at the same time. Hence, irony could work as a reasoning device by illustrating defective expectancies and norms, and putting these into perspective. Through irony, readers can become aware of the fact that a traditional problem definition, causation, expectancy or norm is no longer valid, and thus acts to change the problem definition, expectancy or norm to fit the general state of affairs. This means that irony can be used to change deficient frames. By doing so, irony can also reveal the other (counter-)norms as held by the ironist (e.g., Drucker, Fein, Bergerbest, & Giora, 2014).

El Refaie (2005) presents an example of how irony can undermine existing frames in the context of a case study of irony use in Austrian news reports of an immigration case in which Kurdish refugees landed in South Italy in a boat, seeking asylum. While the overall tone of the news reports was negative about the Kurds and objected against their getting asylum (e.g., by suggesting the country should be *secured* from illegal immigrants), some journalists used irony as a means of sending an alternative message, in support of the Kurds. These journalists ironically quoted and ridiculed statements made by opponents of the Kurdish case (e.g., by ironically proposing that the country should be “*secured*” against tortured, desperate people). In this way, these ironic comments targeted the dominant anti-immigrant frames, with the intention of changing the content and tone of the debate. El Refaie (2005) concludes that irony is a particularly impactful framing device to introduce an opposing frame to a dominant discourse: Ironic framing presents a negative evaluation of the dominant frame in the discourse, which could subsequently open up the possibility for introducing alternative frames. Thus, at the level of reasoning devices, irony is used to give a negative evaluation of existing problem definitions and causes, implying that alternative solutions need to be explored.

Other studies suggest that irony is not only used by journalists for these goals, but also by political actors aiming to attack political opponents. For example, Pehlivan and Berthon (2011) describe an ironic campaign during the 2012 US Presidential Elections for a nonexistent politician called Hugh Jidette (pronounced phonetically as *huge debt*). In this campaign, the fictional Hugh Jidette runs for US President on the promise of doubling the nation’s national debt when elected. The makers of this campaign hoped to raise awareness for the continued spending of all candidates (Pehlivan & Berthon, 2011). Through this fictional and ironic campaign, the makers aimed to critique the candidates for their expenditures as well as making the national debt an issue during the elections. Audience responses reported by Pehlivan and Berthon (2011) indicate that various audience members took up on the frames presented in the campaign, meaning that the criticism of existing candidates took hold.

Thus, while many studies suggest that, at the level of reasoning, irony serves to challenge existing frames, other research shows that irony can also serve to maintain frames, even in the wake of information that disconfirms elements of the frame (Burgers & Beukeboom, in press; Karstetter, 1964; Kaufer & Neuwirth, 1982). This



perspective, called the irony bias, argues that speakers use more irony in situations with unexpected (vs. expected) outcomes (e.g., a violation of existing problem definitions, causation, expectancies or norms). Recipients of ironic utterances subsequently process both the literal meaning (e.g., *really good policy initiative*) and the intended meaning (e.g., *really bad policy initiative*) of the utterance. Because the literal meaning is active and retained in memory during and after processing (e.g., Akimoto, Miyazawa, & Muramoto, 2012; Giora, Fein, & Schwartz, 1998), it mitigates the impact of the intended meaning. Furthermore, recipients exposed to irony (vs. literal messages) are likelier to attribute the causes of a behavior to specific circumstances of the individual situation rather than to characteristics of the actor. This indicates that irony also leads to more external attribution compared to literal language (Averbeck, 2010; Burgers & Beukeboom, in press). As a result, the irony bias argues that irony can help to preserve existing expectancies and norms, even in the face of disconfirming situational information. In this way, irony can make recipients implicitly discard factual information showing a frame's deficiency and retain the frame.

Both perspectives argue that irony is a powerful device in both frame maintenance and frame change. Irony can both challenge (El Refaie, 2005; Wilson & Sperber, 2004) and reinforce (Burgers & Beukeboom, in press) established problem definitions, causes, expectancies and norms. In some cases (e.g., political shows like "The Daily Show" which combine political commentary with humor), an ironic stance throughout the entire program makes it difficult to pin down the exact position and goal of the show's anchor and producers when commenting on the news (Baym, 2005). Hence, irony differs from other figures because irony is not used to create a new frame, but rather to comment on frames that are already in usage. By ironizing an established frame, authors can both maintain and challenge this frame.

In sum, various studies showed that metaphor, hyperbole and irony are important framing devices for various topics related to political communication and journalism. Yet, figurative framing is not limited to these areas. Other studies have shown that these figurative-framing devices are used in similar ways to frame a variety of societal topics, ranging from health (e.g., Gibbs & Franks, 2002; Krieger, 2014) to environmentalism (e.g., Pehlivan, Berthon, Berthon, & Cross, 2013; van Gorp & van der Goot, 2012). Herewith, an important requirement for developing a new perspective on framing is met (Borah, 2011; de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012), in that figurative framing is relevant for not just one issue but rather a variety of social issues. Furthermore, we argue that various types of figurative language (metaphor, hyperbole, and irony) not only operate on the linguistic level, but also on the conceptual level: The three figurative devices can be used to promote a problem definition, causation, evaluate an issue and/ or present a particular solution. In this way, figurative frames do not only operate on the level of language as a framing device as has been shown in earlier framing studies (e.g., De Landtsheer et al., 2008; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Joris et al., 2014), but also at the conceptual level, as reasoning devices.

Until now, we have discussed different literature looking at metaphor, hyperbole, and irony as a framing device. Of course, in discourse, it is not only possible to use

such a figure in isolation, but also to use them in combination. This next section deals with such combinations of figurative framing devices.

### Combinations of figurative frames

While most studies deal with metaphor, hyperbole, or irony in isolation, the different figurative framing devices can of course also be combined. We propose that such combinations can have communicative effects going beyond the effects of any of these frames in isolation. The Dutch debate on immigration, for instance, has been impacted by a frame combining metaphor and hyperbole for quite some time. In the debate, right-wing politician Geert Wilders referred to a “tsunami of Islamization” (Elsevier, 2006) when discussing the number of immigrants to the Netherlands from Islamic countries. This frame builds on a conventional metaphor comparing immigration to waves. At the same time, the metaphoric wave is hyperbolically extended into the largest wave possible, a tsunami. Such frames make an abstract concept like immigration concrete through metaphor, while simultaneously exaggerating the impact through hyperbole. Likely, such a combinatory figurative frame has different effects than a frame containing only metaphor or hyperbole. Various scholars have noted that the various figures can be closely related (cf. Averbeck, 2015; Gibbs, 2000), and often occur together in discourse (Kreuz, Roberts, Johnson, & Bertus, 1996), but, at the same time, each of the three figures is also clearly distinct (cf. Carston & Wearing, 2015). While a systematic investigation of combinations of figurative language devices is currently lacking from the literature, some case studies support our notion that combinations of metaphor, hyperbole and irony can have an impact that goes beyond the individual impact of one of these figures alone. We discuss these case studies below.

Combinations of metaphor and irony have been studied in a case study of ironic similes (Veale, 2013). A simile is a type of metaphor that is linguistically presented in the form of *as X as a Y* (e.g., *as strong as a bear*). In an ironic simile, the X and Y elements are contraries, in that the X element presents readers with a quality that the Y element typically does *not* have (e.g., *as useful as an inflatable dart board*, Veale, 2013). Such ironic similes have a differential impact compared to nonironic similes: a nonironic simile presents readers with a conventional image that builds on stereotypical knowledge (e.g., bears are usually strong). Ironic similes, in contrast, present readers with a subversion of stereotypical knowledge (e.g., inflatable dartboards are *not* useful, as they will deflate upon impact). In doing so, ironic similes present elements of stereotypical knowledge (inflatable objects and darts do not go together), and also contain an element of wit that nonironic similes do not possess. In this way, ironic similes are creative subversions that present a new perspective on common stereotypical knowledge (Veale, 2013), and can thereby present new problem definitions or causes.

Combinations of irony and hyperbole have been studied in the context of pragmatic goals achieved by speakers. One study (Colston & Keller, 1998) compared how

audiences responded to hyperbolic comments (e.g., *There is not a single person in line* to comment on a line consisting of two persons), ironic comments (e.g., *The line is long*), and ironic hyperboles (e.g., *The line is a million miles long*). Results showed that, from ironic hyperboles, recipients inferred more surprise than from either hyperbolic or ironic comments alone. This suggests that combining the two figures of irony and hyperbole into one frame has a larger impact on evaluation than when each of these figures is used in isolation.

Combinations of metaphor and hyperbole have mainly been studied in the form of isolated case studies. One example is that of the Frankenfood frame, where genetically modified food was framed in an extremely negative way (Hellsten, 2003).<sup>1</sup> This hyperbolic metaphor quickly became a dominant frame in the public debate when NGOs (opposed to genetically modified food) introduced it in the late 1990s. At the same time, the frame's influence was relatively short-lived, as its impact increased until the year 2000, but decreased shortly after (Hellsten, 2003). This case study suggests that frames combining metaphor and hyperbole may have a large impact in steering public debates in the relative short term, but lose their strength after some time. However, these observations are based on one case only, and should be investigated more systematically across societal topics.

We argue that combinatory figurative frames have framing effects that go beyond the impact of each of the individual figures. By combining two figures, it becomes more difficult for critics to challenge the frame, because it contains two rhetorical operations at the same time, making it very hard to pin down the author on their words. For instance, using only a rhetorical hyperbole (e.g., "one of the worst laws ever") may easily be discarded as a nonfactual overstatement, while a metaphoric hyperbole (e.g., "Tsunami") is more difficult to argue against. In this way, complex figurative frames combine the power of the individual figures to an effect neither figure would have in isolation. This can strengthen their effects in reasoning. Therefore, as a first step toward a systematic analysis, we present all possible combinations of metaphor, hyperbole and irony in Figure 1. Theoretically, all combinations are possible within a given topic. However, in practice, actors in public debates will probably use some instantiations over others, or use different instantiations at different places in the debate to achieve different framing goals. Figure 1 presents a framework that can be used for such a systematic study of figurative framing, in that it makes all configurations of figurative frames visible and explicit.

## A research agenda for figurative framing

In this article, we took up the challenge from the framing literature to find new ways of approaching framing theory (Borah, 2011; de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012). We introduced our figurative framing theory, which is based on figurative language like metaphor, hyperbole and irony. In our view, these figures are used as both framing and reasoning devices to shape the public's opinion on important topics by presenting a particular problem definition, cause and moral evaluation, and implying policy

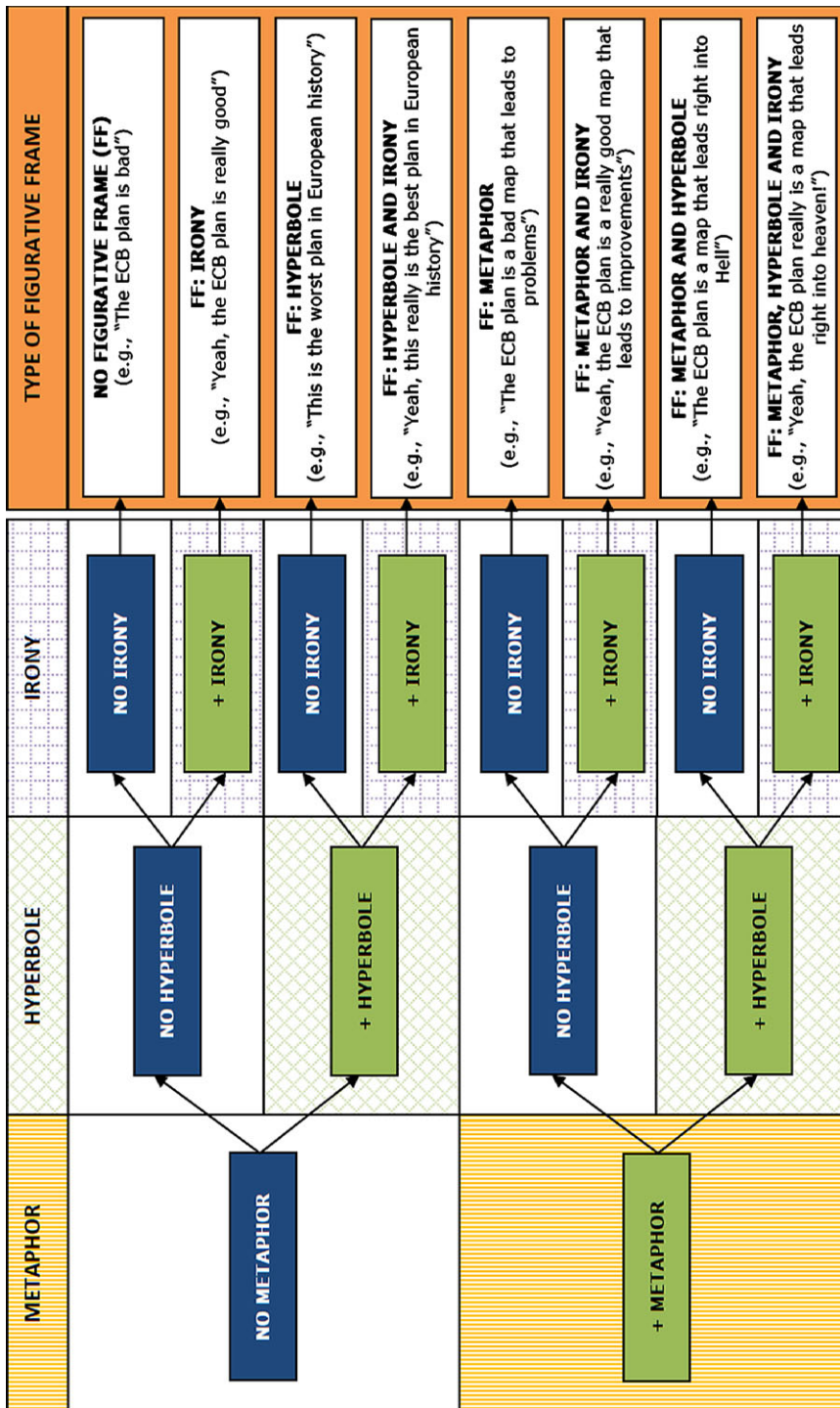


Figure 1 Illustration of types of figurative frames and examples based on one base message ("The ECB plan to buy state bonds is bad").

solutions. Furthermore, we posit that *complex* figurative frames (i.e., combinations of metaphor, hyperbole and/or irony) can have an impact beyond each of the figures in isolation. In this way, figurative framing is an important new type of framing in communication.

In presenting Figure 1, we have established a taxonomy of types of figurative frames as a background for systematic research into framing effects. From here, we can identify the key challenges that lie ahead in this research line. In general, framing research can focus on four distinct key processes: (a) frame building, (b) frame setting, (c) individual-level effects of frames, and (d) the feedback loop from audience to journalists (Scheufele, 1999). In the following, we describe our perspective on future research into figurative framing regarding these four key processes, and give a number of predictions that are open to empirical verification.

First, frame building refers to the process through which societal actors construct different frames (Brüggemann, 2014; Scheufele, 1999). In other words, scholars studying the frame-building process focus on when and why societal actors decide to use (which) figurative frames for which purpose. The frame-building literature suggests that this decision is dependent upon the topic, the actor's own (ideological) background, as well as characteristics of the medium and of influential sources (Scheufele, 1999).

With respect to the topic, figurative frames containing metaphor and/or hyperbole can present their readers with a particular problem description and evaluation (cf. Hartman, 2012; Kaufmann, 2004). This suggests that such figurative frames would be used relatively more often if knowledge about the problem is lacking in the audience. That is, we propose that *figurative frames containing metaphor and/or hyperbole are used more often when talking about new topics (e.g., new technological or policy developments such as net neutrality) compared to established topics. Furthermore, abstract and complex topics (e.g., advanced scientific or economic concepts) invite more metaphoric frames than straightforward topics.*

Furthermore, figurative frames with any of the three figures (metaphor, hyperbole, and irony) can be used to attack (e.g., El Refaie, 2005) or maintain (e.g., Burgers & Beukeboom, in press) existing frames. Thereby, figurative framing may be particularly relevant in the context of debates on contested and challenging issues. In such debates, both opponents aiming to attack existing frames and proponents striving to maintain existing frames could use figurative frames. Thus, we propose that *figurative frames are used more often in public debates in which the status quo is under discussion compared to debates where the status quo is agreed upon.* Furthermore, in contested debates, speakers may want to use their opponents' frames against them (e.g., by using complex figurative frames). Thus, we expect that *complex figurative frames are used more often in public debates where the status quo is under discussion compared to debates where the status quo is agreed upon.*

The second key process to be studied in future research on figurative framing is frame setting (Scheufele, 1999). The process of frame setting describes if and when media frames are transferred to the audience, and impact the audience's frames. The

framing literature suggests that two conditions should be satisfied for media frames to impact audience frames: (a) frame salience and (b) frame importance should both be high (Scheufele, 1999). Frame salience is high when the audience uses the frame when thinking about the target concept (and thus uses the reasoning elements of the figurative frame to think about the topic under discussion). For example, if an audience member immediately activates the Frankenfood frame when thinking about genetically modified food, frame salience of the Frankenfood frame is high. Frame importance is high when the audience thinks a specific frame is highly relevant to a specific issue. Thus, if a recipient would use the Frankenfood frame when thinking and reasoning about genetically modified food, frame importance of this frame is high.

We argue that figurative frames can be used to boost both frame salience and frame importance of a given topic (compared to literal frames). First, we propose that figurative frames are more memorable than comparable literal frames (cf. Giora, 1995; Giora, 2003), for instance, by elucidating a complex topic (Hartman, 2012), by raising awareness of an issue (Pehlivan & Berthon, 2011), or by presenting a creative way to think about a topic (Veale, 2013). Thus, we propose that *figurative frames positively boost frame salience (compared to literal frames)*. Furthermore, complex figurative frames could present an even stronger image than frames with a single figure. We therefore also propose that *complex figurative frames boost frame salience (compared to frames based on a single figure)*.

Second, we posit that figurative frames may impact frame relevance, for instance, by intensifying (Thrall, 2007), attacking (e.g., El Refaie, 2005), or maintaining (e.g., Burgers & Beukeboom, in press) an existing frame. This means that figurative frames can both positively (by intensifying or maintaining) and negatively (by attacking) affect frame importance. Thus, we propose that *figurative frames have a larger impact on frame importance compared to literal frames*. Similarly, we propose that *this impact is again increased with complex figurative frames*.

The third key process in framing research is individual-level effects of frames (Scheufele, 1999), which asks when audience frames impact the audience's beliefs, attitudes and/or behaviors related to the frame. Thus, if audience members use a figurative frame (e.g., Frankenfood) to think about a societal issue (e.g., genetically modified food), under which conditions does this frame impact the audience's own stance on that issue (e.g., genetically modified food is bad)? The current framing literature on individual-level effects is mainly concerned with identifying mediators and moderators under which such individual-level effects are increased or hampered.

We propose that two elements are important when identifying such potential mediators and moderators. First, it is important to consider which specific function the figurative frame is expected to fulfill. The current framing literature has for instance found differential effects of political knowledge as a moderator, with competing studies finding the strongest framing effects when political knowledge is low (e.g., Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001), moderate (e.g., Lecheler, Keer, Schuck, & Hänggli, 2015), or high (e.g., Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). We suggest that such conflicting findings can be reconciled by considering the specific functions

of the figurative frame in discourse. We propose that *figurative frames are most effective for participants under low political knowledge, when they serve to present a problem definition of a hitherto unknown concept or issue*. After all, for participants under this condition, the figurative frame adds most information by making an unknown, abstract and/or complex issue (e.g., net neutrality) more concrete and comprehensible. However, we expect a different effect when the figurative frame is used to exaggerate (e.g., Thrall, 2007), attack (e.g., El Refaie, 2005), or maintain (e.g., Burgers & Beukeboom, in press) an existing frame. In these cases, participants need background knowledge to fully appreciate how the specific figurative frame engages with the frames that are already in usage. Thus, we hypothesize *that figurative frames that respond to an existing frame (e.g., by exaggerating, attacking or maintaining existing frames) are most effective for participants with high political knowledge*.

The second important element to consider when identifying moderators and mediators of individual-level effects of figurative frames concerns the way the figurative frame fits personal characteristics of the recipient. For instance, one study found that metaphors containing source elements from the domain of violence (e.g., a campaign message stating “As your representative, I promise to *fight* for all the people”) were more effective than comparable literal statements (e.g., “I promise to *work* for all the people”) for individuals high in trait aggressiveness (Kalmoe, 2014). Similarly, metaphors referring to the right in positive terms (e.g., you’re *right*, *right* on track) and to the left in negative terms (e.g., he has two *left* hands) were more pronounced in right-handed than in left-handed individuals (Casasanto, 2009). That is, right-handers themselves work better with the right-hand side of their bodies, enabling stronger positive associations with right compared to left. Thus, we propose that *figurative frames that either explicitly or implicitly tap into personal characteristics of their audience are more effective than those that do not*.

The fourth and final key process in framing research is the feedback loop from audience to journalists (Scheufele, 1999). This loop pertains to the question how journalists use audience feedback to perpetuate or change their framing of an issue over a longer period of time. The feedback loop can be studied in the case of individual articles (i.e., how audience feedback on one particular article impacts the journalist’s decision in writing the next article on the same issue) or on long-term issue coverage. After all, some frames can be used for a longer period of time across language and cultures. The figurative frames describing politics as a game (Aalberg et al., 2012) and elections as a horserace (Iyengar et al., 2004), for instance, can be used to cover a variety of elections across various countries. Other frames, by contrast, impact public discourse over a relatively short period of time, after which their influence diminishes (e.g., Frankenfood; Hellsten, 2003). Future research could study this feedback loop to determine which kinds of figurative frames shape the debate both in the short and the long term in which ways.

The current article introduced figurative framing theory to discuss framing with types of figuration like metaphor, hyperbole and irony. We showed (a) how the three

types of figuration contain linguistic and conceptual content, (b) that figurative framing is an important type of framing in communication, because it is used to shape public discourse across societal topics and (c) that combinatory figurative frames may have a differential impact compared with figurative frames that are based on only one type of figuration. We concluded our article with a research agenda for figurative framing, where we showed how figurative framing can be incorporated into research in the four key processes of framing research (frame building, frame setting, individual-level effects, and feedback loop), and presented a number of testable hypotheses for future research. We hope that this article sets the stage for further communication research on figurative framing, showing how figurative framing is similar to and different from conventional perspectives on framing.

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### Notes

- 1 Please note that the original paper (Hellsten, 2003) only analyzes this frame in terms of its metaphoric, but not its hyperbolic elements. We argue that the Frankenfood frame is both hyperbolic and metaphoric, and that this combinatory figurative frames may impact public discourse in differential ways from frames that contain only metaphor or only hyperbole.

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