

SCLA 2007 Chicago: Abstract Proposal for Main Session

David S. Danaher, Associate Professor
Slavic Languages & Literatures
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Note: I am applying for the main session, but I realize that my proposal falls outside cognitive linguistics proper as defined in the abstract guidelines, that is, I do not attempt to provide a psychologically plausible explanation of a linguistic phenomenon. I understand if this disqualifies the paper from inclusion in the conference.

"We live in a time when reality is in conflict with platitude, when a fact is in conflict with an *a priori* interpretation of it."

– Václav Havel

A Frame Approach to Havel

As a writer, Václav Havel is known primarily for his plays, and it has become a cliché of Havelian criticism to assert that Havel is essentially a playwright. His writings, however, have spanned a variety of genres, some of which pre-date the plays, and Havel has proven himself influential in each of these genres: literary and cultural criticism, graphic poetry, plays, "dissident" philosophical essays, political speeches, and political memoir. To what extent can we speak of coherence in Havel's cross-genre writings and why the variety? I propose to apply one aspect of cognitive linguistics, frame analysis, to reading Havel, and I argue that Havel's obsession with issues of conceptual framing represents the thread that both ties together and accounts for his cross-genre production.

In his seminal work on frame analysis, Goffman noted (without referencing Havel) that absurdist theater plays so much with framing that "one might better call it the theater of frames" (399). In what sense is this true of Havel's plays and of Havel's oeuvre as a whole? Indeed, it is tempting to read Havel's oeuvre as an extension of Goffman's work on the frame-based organization of human experience from the microlevel of face-to-face interaction (Goffman's contribution) to the macrolevel of human identity in modern age. Goffman hints that frame analysis could be so extended, but it is arguably Havel, without knowledge of Goffman, who has carried out the necessary work.

Besides putting into perspective Havel's cross-genre proclivities, a frame approach to reading Havel illuminates other aspects of his writings such as why Havel's works often resonate so powerfully with readers who know little or nothing of his socio-historical context or why his works are best taught together and not as isolated texts in this or that (usually polisci) course. Key concepts in Havel's thinking also become more transparent against the background of a frame approach: for example, his exposition of the circles of home ("domov") as related to questions of human identity as well as his notoriously difficult discussion of the Immediate and Absolute Horizons of human experience.

I do not believe that it is a mere coincidence that both Goffman's and Havel's oeuvre focus, independently of one another and each in its own way, on questions of framing. Cognitive scientists would all agree that framing is central to understanding modern identity, but I hope to demonstrate that Havel's implicit, existentialist treatment of framing captures this more convincingly than Goffman's explicit, analytical discussion (or, for that matter, Lakoff's recent work on the politics of framing). In other words, Havel frames framing in a way that teaches us something essential about how it works and what it means for us, something that remains less vivid (merely hinted at but not fully developed) in technical works on the same issue.

Goffman, E. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*.

Havel, V. 1999. *Spisy* [Writings, 7 volumes].

Lakoff, G. 2006. *Whose Freedom? The Battle over America's Most Important Idea*.