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Understanding a meta-language of influence

I want to start by being clear that I am writing about a subject I know practically nothing about. I suspect there are people that know a great deal more than I do about it, and there is plenty of evidence that there are people who know how to do the things I will talk about way better than I. But I have yet to find anyone describing the thing I am going to try to describe, and if you know of one, I look forward to the introduction.

Biden Friday

I was watching Biden's speech on the evening of 2020-11-06, before he was announced as the winner by the major media outlets, and I noticed something I consider to be absolutely brilliant. In a relatively short sequence of words and actions, he expressed a sequence of emotions that went from expressions addressing anger, to calming that anger, to turning the narrative to uplifting. His skill in communicating this using words, tonality and emphasis, body and facial movements, not only to one person, but simultaneously to millions of people, many of whom disagree with him was, to me, astounding.

But this piece is not about his skill. Rather it is about the notion of a language for expressing the emotional sequence he went through, with the idea of understanding the influence sequences and being able to analyze, discuss, reproduce, and adjust them to circumstance, perhaps someday automatically, but for now, just being able to express them.

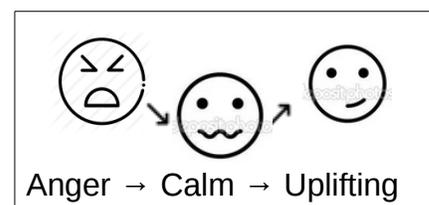
Some symbols

At this point, my poorly thought out ideas on this require a picture to express. And I think that may always be so. Somehow, the expression I have on paper looks something like this:

Anger (|) ↘ Calm (~~~) ↗ Uplifting (~~~)

Removing the words, which symbols may ultimately replace, and subject to the lack of subtlety in the arrows, we get:

| ↘ ~~~ ↗ ~~~



So naturally, I looked up symbols for calm and peace, and the best things I could really find were emoji faces →

These are reasonably expressive, not too big, and perhaps usable for these expressions.

Semantic restrictions of the useful language

The idea in influence using this meta-language is to identify a state of mind you can get the observer to attach themselves to (a feeling they have), and then drive them through a change sequence to bring them to a new desired state. The theory of change underlying this notion of movement is that you cannot take someone mad and make them happy in a single step. Rather, you need to get synced up to their emotional state then go to reachable adjacent states.

So anger to uplifting is likely to bring you into conflict and rejection, producing more anger or something else. Whereas the sequence anger to calm is achievable as is calm to uplifting. So an approach to influence is to find the pairings that work and identify a sequence to bring the target from an initial emotional state to a final desired emotional state.

As you move through the states of emotion, you can associate different memes that are dragged along and become part of the target's thought process. The shorter the sequence the easier it is to keep the target engaged. The longer the sequence, the less likely they are to understand what you did. But there are so many readily distinguishable emotional states and methods of transitioning from state to state (or at least pairings that can work).

States, pairings, and transition methods

So what are the states, pairings, and methods for transition? I do not know the whole language yet, but here's a start from some of the things I have collected over the years.

Here's a little thing I picked up from a source I cannot recall:

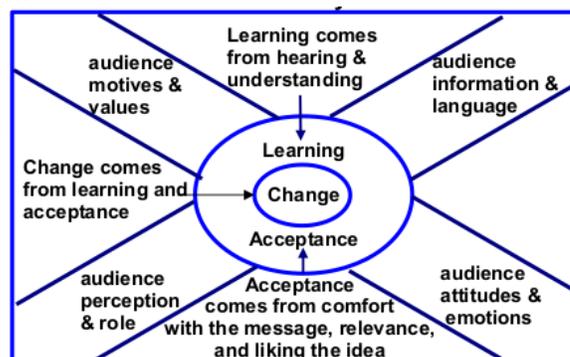
Cause	Emotion	Behavior	Cure
Frustration	Hostility	Aggression/apathy	Venting
Threat	Fear	Fight/flight	Safety
Conflict	Anxiety	Inefficiency	Resolution
Violation of values	Guilt	Arbitrary Rejection	Punishment
Loss	Sorrow	Crying	Grieving
Failure	Self-pity	Overindulgence	Try try again

Notionally, if you can identify an emotion from a behavior, you may be able to cure the behavior, and identifying the cause gives you the context to identify the emotional state transition elements.

As an example, if this notion is correct, is we see aggression, we identify it as the emotion of hostility, caused by frustration, and cure it by supporting some venting. Of course venting also has a tendency to accelerate some patterns in the brain, and what is the state we are looking for as a consequence? And what are the full set of emotions exactly? This later. In the meanwhile...

Persuasion at each step and writ large

According to the persuasion model of Karrass¹, change comes from learning and acceptance, which come, respectively, from; hearing and understanding; and comfort with the message, relevance, and liking the idea. Audience provides the context for messaging based on motivations, values, information, language, perception, role, and attitudes and emotions. It gets more complicated from there. But my point is that, in formulating a method for externally changing minds, in the case of Biden for a nation state, his speech demonstrated a capacity to do this writ large, by identifying common emotions in a sequence, and connecting to different people on the path from anger and frustration to calm, and then to uplifting. Everything from body posture and motion, speech pattern, word usage, tonality, age, gender, hand movement, and facial expression supported this messaging.



I note here that "externally changing minds" is a limitation I am putting on myself here. Two aspects of this are (1) clinical research shows ways to do this with wires and other signals sent directly into the brain, and (2) current technology doesn't support that at large scale.

¹ Chester L. Karras, "The Negotiating Game"

What are the emotional states?

According to the “Big 5” model commonly used in psychological research, there are things I will call personality traits that are related to emotions. You can enter a few sentences of text from your writings and get a Language in Word Count (LIWC) analysis at all.net by selecting “Psycho” from one of the drop-down menus in the left column. The result will list details for “personality traits” and their component parts:²

- **Neuroticism:** Anxiety, Anger, Depression, Self-Consciousness, Immoderation, and Vulnerability
- **Extroversion:** Friendliness, Gregariousness, Assertiveness, Activity-level, Excitement-seeking, and Cheerfulness
- **Openness to experience:** Imagination, Artistic-interests, Emotionality, Adventurousness, Intellect, and Liberalism
- **Agreeableness:** Trust, Morality, Altruism, Cooperation, Modesty, and Sympathy
- **Conscientiousness:** Self-efficacy, Orderliness, Dutifulness, Achievement-striving, and Cautiousness.

How do you move people who are high on the scale of neuroticism displaying anxiety and anger into a higher level of conscientiousness and agreeableness? I am not a psychologist or a psychiatrist, but I imagine the answer they would give is “it depends”, and start years of slowly progressive therapy³.

The answer notioned by this article is that we move them through a multidimensional emotional state space by reducing anxiety and anger, induce some friendliness and cheer, and introduce imagination and adventurousness with an ask for trust based on morality, altruism, cooperation, modesty, and sympathy, to produce achievement-striving and self-efficacy.

Reverting back to Biden, you can see all of these elements in his speech, woven in and repeated over months and years. For example:

- Friendliness and cheer (almost always smiling and being welcoming, never aggressive or accusing, telling the story of his early career where he learned that political positions are not necessarily reflections of morality of people).
- Morality and sympathy through is love of and dedication to family over many years, and the personal tragedies he has gone through, modesty if only by comparison to the opponent, cooperation and altruism (President for all Americans, across the isle, etc.)
- And his message is one of working together in new areas, bringing in the imagination, and adventurousness, and seeking achievement and self-efficacy for us all (by describing his plans for change and claim that there is nothing we cannot do if we do it together).

He hooks different people in at different points, and brings them into the narrative.

² As an aside, putting some of the text of this article into the analyzer, it says that my text is correlated to high agreeableness, with positive values for all of the component parts. Many who have known me for many years may assert a high likelihood of an error in the program or the underlying theory.

³ A part of our “high fees, no guarantees” service package, similar in many ways to our expert witness services.

Not a love fest

This is not a love fest for Biden. It is merely an example of how influence works, can work, and did work to help change minds in the US elections. And to be clear, this was done in the context of stark contrast.

You could reasonably say that the opponent in this election was driving the process in the opposite direction, seeking to divide and conquer, sewing anxiety, anger, depression, and immoderation across a wide spectrum of acts, including speech, but also in actions related to COVID-19, treatment of others across his lifetime, etc.

And both of these forces are and are always present in today's human world. These are influence operations that each are designed to move a society and the individuals within it toward different situational ends. And each combines words and actions to change emotional states as both the means and objectives.

Influence – the tool

I wrote software to help people understand how to analyze and apply influence, and to automate much of that analysis. The tool is called "**Influence**" (there's a surprise), and it is detailed in a perfected patent on analysis of influence strategies. The basic mechanism of **Influence** (the tool) are to classify targets of influence (the people in a group) within a 2-dimensional space of importance (to them) and favorability (to the objective of the influence).

Each target is then characterized, approximately according to the Big 5, and based on their place in the space, sought to be moved from high unfavorability and importance, to lower importance, to less unfavorable, and if you can get them to favorable, back up in importance. This is accomplished by applying different sorts of power (physical, resources, position, expertise, charisma, and emotion) and influence (overt, covert, and bridging).

For example, by using positional power, reducing information and the right to access regarding an action, likely reduces the importance of the action to the target at least for the moment. As it becomes less important, they won't fight as hard against the idea, so they may become susceptible to hearing and understanding, become comfortable with the message because of the source (e.g., an expert they trust), and find it relevant to their objectives (moving it to favorable), and once this happens, increasing interest by adding information and bringing in charisma may make them become an advocate for what they once opposed.

The tool does this in parallel for multiple targets with identified personality characteristics, and of course can be run in reverse to move people friendly to an idea away from it as well. It allows simulation of the path forward and can even notion out a sequence of changes in communication to attempt to optimize the influence operation.

Putting concepts into action

There is a big difference between saying you should reduce information (i.e., draw their focus away from one of your objectives) and finding the specific communications that will achieve this. In a simplistic way, if you have the raw power to stop them from finding out about things (e.g., take them off the project) and to distract them to look at something else (e.g., give them a new job assignment with lots to do), you can do that. But if you are not in that position, you need to use sonic and optical wave forms (speech and appearance) to do the trick. And of course the strategy of **Influence** may not be the only one out there.

Other strategies and tactics

Moving people from state to state is rarely done in a single inspirational moment. It usually sets up as having many preconditions, a desire to change, a need to reconcile, unhappiness, etc. When the conditions are right, a switch can flip, or a slow motion change can take place. The way things are expressed, and the emotion behind those expressions, are all part of gaining the sympathetic ear of the listener and moving them along the path. Repetition helps a lot, because people get used to the idea, find it harder to challenge over time, and may come to like it. It becomes a song stuck in your head, a loop that's hard to break.

- The path of (reduce interest ↓, change mindset →, increase interest ↑) is one strategy.
- The strategy of (anger ↘ calm ↗ uplift) is another one.

If you think of up and down as intensity (e.g., importance to them) and right and left as favorability (e.g., they are less or more favorable), and think of the arrows as verbs and the states as nouns, you start to get sentences.

- $E \downarrow, E \rightarrow E, \uparrow E$ where E are the emotional nouns

We can drive this the other direction to move from favorable to unfavorable as well.

Confidence games

There are plenty of other strategies for different situations. Once place to find them is in the literature of frauds. For example, common methods include the long con, the short con, the quick rip, false return, and many others. Here is a layout for a short con:

Short Con [Take everything on them]

- 1) Too good to be true [Free money for doing nothing]
- 2) Nothing to lose [V thinks they hold the money]
- 3) Out of their element [V not an expert at it]
- 4) Limited-time offer [A decision has to be made now]
- 5) References [Independent opinion legitimizes]
- 6) Pack mentality [Everyone else agrees on what to do]
- 7) Reason not to report [Embarrass / illegal / Get away w/it]

From their starting emotion, you replace it with greed. You do this by presenting something they want (money/diamonds, etc.) and that they can get without apparent risk (they hold the money). You kick them over the action threshold by expert references, and get them to agree with the new position by social influence. You take the money and run, and by the time they realize, they are lost, left with negative emotions about themselves.

Communications mechanisms (the verbs)

Moving and replacing emotional states of mind is commonly done by conversational gambits. These are tricks of the trade that play on cognitive errors people are widely known to have and that have been experimentally demonstrated in the psychological literature. Moving from the frauds into the area of elicitation, the basic sequence goes like this:

- Elicitation [Generate and exploit trust for knowledge]
- 1) Identify V [ID by life characteristics: low-level, frustrated, life state]
- 2) Establish rapport w/V [Use behavioral liking techniques, matching, etc.]
- 3) Get small things [Establish stream of small minor answers]
- 4) Remind of past items [Recall subtly of previous information given]
- 5) Return to innocuous [Before departure move on]
- 6) Create expected future [Next contact planned or anticipated]
- 7) Avoid suspicion [Go slow, back off easily, evade, depart] (and loop to 3)
- 8) If really hooked, nail [After point of no return extort & reward]

The conversational gambits used in elicitation run something like this:

- Presumptive questions (state fact confirm/deny : generate correction)
 - When you state as fact something to an expert, they become interested (↑) and feel as if their expertise mandates that they correct you (→) which also makes them feel superior and make this discussion all the more important (↑). Thus (↑ → ↑)
- Offer an alternative (partial disagreement – not complete)
 - When you try to contradict them (←), they feel compelled to correct further (← → ↑)
- Flattery (you are an expert / compliment V to others)
 - When you flatter them for their knowledge, they relax, feel pride, and like you (→ ↑)
- Give information appearing to be sensitive (we are in the same club)
 - When you give them apparently confidential information they feel closer to you (→)
- Give partial story (allow V to correct / embellish / fill in)
 - As you converse with them, they want to join in – social pressure (↑ → ↑)
- Claim that nobody could possibly know X (pride will cause an explanation)
 - Insult requiring response (← ↓ → ↑)
- Claim that X is impossible (pride will claim it is and demonstrate)
 - Amazement at their expertise drives increased pride (↑ → ↑)
- Discuss others in the field (elicit superiority response)
 - They claim even more specialness for themselves (↑ → ↑)
- Sex, drugs (especially when exhausted)
 - I'll drink to that – celebration and feelings of success (↑ → ↑)
- The illusion of choice (present choices to confirm known)
 - They get to show off (↑ → ↑)
- Put the target on the defensive (question their consistency)
 - Let them prove they know more than you (↓ → ↑ →)

The conversational gambits go at different places in the elicitation sequence to drive step by step from innocent to complicit to guilty to owned.

Words words words

Obviously, there are a vast number of words and all the more word sequences. Add to that the expressiveness of the speaker, context, emotional conveyance, media, and so forth, and you have a vast potential space of actions. And of course you have the opportunity to get feedback so you can adapt with time, and you can target down the the level of the individual, in a battle-space involving about 7B individuals.

There are, of course, many methods of moving people through emotional space, personality- and state-dependent actions that may be more or less suitable, available, and effective, and so forth.

If we go beyond individuals to groups, and allow for multiple groups of arbitrary sizes with imperfect communications, the number of possibilities skyrockets to unfathomable complexity.

And yet, we have a working system of global human influence every day that is effective and inexpensive.

Forming and understanding a language of influence

The syntax, semantics, and context of use of any language is limited in terms of expressibility. Some languages are better at expressing some things, while others are worse. Chinese and Japanese characters express English sentence fragments in a single symbol. Iconography can be used if you learn the language, and many other ways are around to express the low-level nouns and verbs of language.

Putting a language of influence together seems like a daunting task, and I don't notion that I will do it before the end of this page. Rather, I think we have a start at one level of abstraction. There are basic nouns (names for emotions) and verbs (expressing increases or decreases in favorability and importance) that act on nouns over time through the use of target-specific meme delivery and suppression and may be applied as we gain feedback on progress of the emotional state of the target. We don't yet have the list of nouns and meme expressions, but we have a start. And the mere presence of a valid sequence of terms in a language does not tell about efficacy, which is a metrics the language will seemingly need.

We can form small sequences (e.g., anger ↘ calm ↗ uplift) and apply them to individuals and groups with limited numbers of memes expressed in limited expressions. These sequences can be acted upon in situation-dependent ways limited by the capability of the individual influencing and the target susceptibility, and exploiting individual contextual views. We can express these individual characteristics using limited terms (as done in **Influence**) and form plans to act on them in sequence. We don't have a great way to measure where in the space an individual is, but we use estimates by the influencer to get the job done. We don't know how long it takes for people to achieve the calm after the anger, or how much to express or not to support their movement from state to state. And we know that the words we use matter, but don't have a systematic way to identify which words to use in what situations. We do know that some folks are very good at it. Thus we have only a meta-language of influence.

Conclusions

When I started, I told you that I know practically nothing about this subject matter, and now you know that is true. I know a few rudimentary things that I can sort of paste together. But clearly there is a long way to go to get to a reasonably useful language of influence.