

## Using a Language-Outcome Framework for Self-Reflection

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### INTRODUCTION

“It’s going to get worse before it gets better,” said Steve (not his real name) as he looked down and away from our shared zoom screen. Steve has developed a habit of using language which negatively influences his outcomes.

I suggested the idea that perhaps his situation would get “harder” before it gets “easier,” but I was not convinced that worse and better were the right ways to describe his future conditions. He was skeptical, which launched us into a discussion regarding the way language influences outcomes in our lives.

From that point on, we have used the Language-Outcome Framework as a visual reference in all of our meetings. In this framework (pictured below) we identify some of the essential components of one’s process (Language, Mindset, Behaviour, Outcome, External Factors, and Response). Each deserves to be considered individually, through a context-specific filter, and in its relationship to other components.

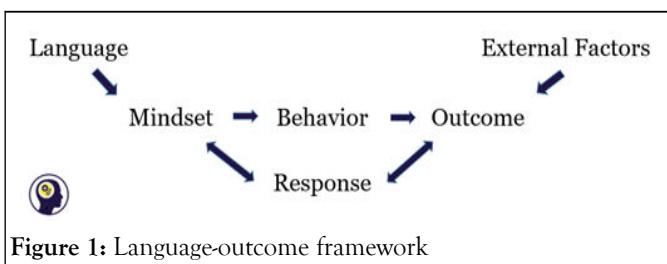


Figure 1: Language-outcome framework

The framework provides a visual demonstration of how Language influences Mindset, which influences Behavior, which leads to an Outcome. Outcomes are also influenced by External Factors. One has a Response to the Outcome which is influenced by (and contributes to) their Mindset. There are countless additional factors which influence each category—since the exhaustive list of potential variables can be overwhelming, it can be helpful to examine one component at a time [1].

Working to understand the role of Language is often a good starting point. Research regarding social priming is a resonant example of the Language-Outcome relationship. Priming research has been around for decades and was made famous by

Daniel Kahneman. Although there is debate in the field regarding the replicability of Kahneman’s experiments, it is clear that environment (and the language used within it) has the ability to influence behavior [2].

In a study conducted by priming participants to consider gender stereotypes related to skill degraded their performance on tests of that skill. Specifically, the study focused on the stereotype of women being less skilled in math than their male counterparts. Women who were given written cues to consider their gender (language used to influence mindset, or “primed” to consider an existing stereotype) had lower performance outcomes; however, the degraded performance could be mitigated when the stereotype threat was lowered or eliminated [3].

In these cases, the language used before an event—regardless of its validity—impacted the way the participant engaged with the event. Language-based priming influences the set of relationships which are depicted in the Language-Outcome Framework. In the Spencer study, language experienced through reading influenced the way one thought; the way one thought influenced their behavior on a test; that behavior yielded an outcome which was different from participants of similar ability who did not experience similarly priming language [4].

This process occurs routinely in our lives. Consumers are primed to buy certain things when they are on sale, without any deep understanding of original price points. When a product is labeled with the familiar marketing slogan “while supplies last,” a cascade of psychological factors are triggered (in this case, the scarcity principle) which influence mindset and, ultimately, behavior [5].

The language occurring between one’s ears (self-talk) has been rigorously studied to identify its impact on performance, and is often referred to as the filter through which we experience the world. The language we use plays a large contributing role in our behavior.

### The language of growth

Growth mindset is a mental schema that has the power to positively influence one’s thoughts, decisions, and behaviors. The most powerful impact of a growth mindset is the way it

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guides one's response to challenge and their ability to self-reflect [6]. The implications are many, and in a 2009 issue of Olympic Coaching Magazine, Stanford Psychologist Carol Dweck suggests that a growth mindset allows one to "embrace learning, [as well as] welcome challenges, mistakes, and feedback."

The opposite of a growth mindset is a fixed mindset, which is characterized by the interpretation of situations as unchangeable, leaving little or no room for personal agency. In jobs, relationships, and daily operations, challenges are absolute [7]. How one engages with those challenges and their perceived level of agency within them will influence further behavior.

Using language that cultivates a fixed mindset might limit one to a young person believing they are "good" at basketball or "bad" at basketball (assuming their talent is immobile), but language which precipitates a growth mindset allows one to be exactly where they are as a basketball player – neither good nor bad, necessarily—and evolve their skills as needed.

In the context of the Language-Outcome framework, growth mindset has a significant influence on the "Response" component. Generally speaking, those with a growth mindset have more positive responses to outcomes than their peers. When an outcome does not go as planned, those with fixed mindsets have a tendency to be more reactive (if the outcome was immobile or predetermined, agency is low); those with a growth mindset recognize their role in the outcome and adjust accordingly.

It is important to note that those with growth mindsets do not disregard the external factors which have influenced their outcomes (especially when those factors might be unjust); rather, they have a tendency to focus on factors over which they have more control.

To return to the basketball example, an athlete might evaluate their self-talk (Language), their confidence and determination (Mindset), and their technique and in-game decision-making (Behavior)—those factors have a heavy impact on performance Outcomes in a game. If an External Factor (like a questionable call by a referee) adversely influences the Outcome, they will take note but not linger, as their control over that component is low.

In this example, an especially motivated basketball player who intentionally uses the language of growth to cultivate her mindset might decide that there is a larger, systemic issue within referee training and development [8]. There too she can use the Language-Outcome Framework while working toward a different Outcome.

This method has the potential to not only make seemingly overwhelming situations digestible, but its routine implementation can be empowering.

## Empowerment

"Worse" is a value judgement. So it "better." While managing habits and creating more positive outcomes for himself, Steve did not originally see how describing future situations as worse than his current situation could be detrimental.

Suggesting that the future might be "worse" was influencing his mindset which, as we have discussed, also influenced his behavior [9]. The language he used contributed to a mindset of fear and, as a result, his behaviors were overly cautious. His actions were moving in the direction of his intended outcomes, but they were hesitant and laced with self-preservation. By labeling what he was about to do "worse" than the position he currently held, he was unintentionally triggering loss-aversion [10].

Loss-aversion is a psychological concept (a mindset, or state of mind) characterized by the tendency to hold on to current conditions instead of pursuing better ones. In behavioral economics, this plays out in the desire to avoid financial loss instead of pursuing potential gains.

Using the Language-Outcome Framework as a guide, Steve (who happens to be a former basketball player), stopping using the term worse. Instead, he acknowledged that his situation might get "harder before it gets easier." Steve was no stranger to hard work. Using a physiological metaphor, we reflected on the idea that running as a form of exercise is always hard to begin with, and then it gets easier. One develops physical fitness.

One can develop a psychological "fitness" for challenging situations and processes as well. This is a routine process. When one's focus shifts from frustration and fear to the components over which one has control, their sense of agency rises. Improved agency influences willful, thoughtful, self-directed processes. When the process yields improved outcomes, one becomes empowered.

## "Steve"

These days, Steve is more aware of his language. That awareness has given him the confidence to self-evaluate, adjust, and experience more positive outcomes.

Though Steve's situation did get harder, he grew through those hard times. That growth has made similar situations easier. He has developed confidence in his abilities and the humility to understand (and often, forgive) external factors. More often than not, his outcomes are a product of his process. He feels empowered.

"I used to say things like 'this is going to be brutal' whenever I'd start a new project [at work], says Steve, "but in general, I'm more optimistic now, and I actively remind myself of that."

That sounds like a great place to start.

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