

Representation of different social actors in readers' comments on immigration: The case of German newspaper articles

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Abstract

The article discusses how different social actors are represented in discourse related to immigration and refugees. The main focus is on the comments to the German newspaper articles in the context of the meeting of right-wing politicians and extremists, such as the members of the German Alternative für Deutschland party; during that meeting, the participants discussed controversial immigration policies. Comments posted under the articles covering this meeting and its outcomes are analysed using tools provided by Critical Discourse Analysis. This method shows that both the AfD party and migrants are passivated (migrants more than AfD), with AfD being presented as a victim of circumstances, while migrants are mostly treated as objects in most of the comments. Most blame for the situation seems to be directed towards “the democratic opposition”.

Keywords

Critical Discourse Analysis, refugees, migrants, news media, Germany, AfD

Reprezentacja różnych aktorów społecznych w komentarzach pod artykułami w niemieckich gazetach

Abstrakt

Artykuł omawia sposób, w jaki różni aktorzy społeczni są reprezentowani w dyskursie związanym z imigracją i uchodźcami. Główny nacisk położono na komentarze pod artykułami w niemieckich gazetach w kontekście spotkania prawicowych polityków i ekstremistów, takich jak członkowie niemieckiej partii Alternative für Deutschland; podczas tego spotkania uczestnicy dyskutowali o kontrowersyjnej polityce imigracyjnej. Komentarze zamieszczone pod artykułami relacjonującymi to spotkanie i jego wyniki zostały przeanalizowane przy użyciu narzędzi Krytycznej Analizy Dyskursu. Metoda ta pokazuje, że zarówno partia AfD, jak i migranci są pasywizowani (migranci bardziej niż AfD), przy czym AfD jest przedstawiana jako ofiara okoliczności, podczas gdy migranci są w większości komentarzy traktowani przedmiotowo. Większość winy za zaistniałą sytuację wydaje się być skierowana w stronę “demokratycznej opozycji”.

Słowa kluczowe

krytyczna analiza dyskursu, uchodźcy, migranci, media informacyjne, Niemcy, AfD

1. Introduction

In his work from 2003, “The representation of social actors” Theo van Leeuwen wrote:

The question I shall attempt to answer in this chapter can be formulated simply: what are the ways in which social actors can be represented in English discourse? Which choices does the English language give us for referring to people? In addition I shall address another, more specific question: how are the relevant social actors represented in an instance of a particular kind of racist discourse—a discourse which represents immigration in a way that is founded on fear—the fear of loss of livelihood and

the fear of loss of cultural identity as a result of the ‘influx’ of immigrants who are perceived as ‘other’, ‘different’ and ‘threatening’. (van Leeuwen 2003: 32)

The goal of this article is very similar. To examine what choices about referring to people the German language gives us. The original article by van Leeuwen talked exclusively about English. Although originally van Leeuwen purported a difference between English and other languages, this difference appears negligible (especially inside the same language branch). There will surely be some differing strategies, which will be mentioned when they appear.

As such, this article will analyse comments to a group of German articles, whether the categories proposed by Van Leeuwen can be recognised and whether any significant conclusions can be drawn from such an analysis. Thus, outside of the metalinguistic result of whether such categories can be utilised for the German language, insight will be gained into the discourse of this fairly specific environment, which should reflect the general discourse across Germany.

One thing that would probably not happen today is the publication of such an article in a major publication. The media has become more sensitive to this kind of tone. That does not mean the discourse around immigrants and right-wing ideas has majorly transformed. Thus, gauging the discourse around immigration has become quite challenging, as even right-wing publications have become very cautious about the representation of immigrants. There are still places, however, where laypersons convene to discuss their unadulterated ideas about the subject. One of these places is the comment sections of articles. There, anonymity and obscurity secure people from public scrutiny and let them express their views. It is a prime spot to learn what people think and how they express it.

2. Sociopolitical background

For this study, it is crucial to understand the situation in Germany at the beginning of 2024. In January, Correctiv, a German non-profit organisation, published a report concerning the November 2024 meeting of the far-right and right-wing politicians and extremists from Germany and Austria. Media focused on the presence of the members of Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland in German, AfD), a far-right/right-wing, populist party, whose support grew in recent years (in 2021 German federal elections, AfD received 10.4% of the votes; meanwhile its average support in January was around 20%); however, it is worth noting that members of the centre-right CDU, another opposition party, were also present. AfD currently has seventy-eight members in the Bundestag (out of 736), six members in the European Parliament and 252 members in various German state parliaments. The party sparked controversies on multiple occasions; for example, its co-founder and leader said in 2017 that Germans should be proud of the achievements of German soldiers in both World Wars.

During this meeting, participants reportedly discussed the plans for the *remigration* of asylum seekers, foreigners with residency rights, and German citizens who had not assimilated into German society. Some participants distanced themselves from *remigration* plans, while the person who presented it, the Austrian far-right extremist associated with Neo-Nazi groups Martin Sellner, claimed the report distorted his speech. After the Correctiv report, a mass protest started in Germany, calling for the banning of the AfD. Protesters often recalled the policies of Nazi Germany. It is worth noting that migration is a crucial element of German politics; the German government, led by Chancellor Scholz, and opposition parties like CDU are considering deportation and limiting the number of asylum seekers accepted in Germany. CDU proposed sending migrants to third countries like Rwanda, where they would wait when the government processes their asylum requests. This proposition mirrors the

controversial plan introduced in the United Kingdom, where the Supreme Court opposed sending migrants to Rwanda.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis

The main tools and methods are a part of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. They can help to identify patterns, metaphors, and frames common in the media portrayal of RASIM – refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants.

CDA is a framework developed in the 1970s concerned with the reproduction of racism, power relations and ideologies in discourse. It is interested in discourse in a socio-political context; as written by van Dijk (2015), it is “a critical perspective that may be found in all areas of discourse studies” (p. 446).

Van Dijk’s (2015) two main approaches to CDA are:

- (a) macro – concerned with power relations between social groups, institutional,
- (b) micro – dealing with language and communication (more significant for this study), interactional.

The German-speaking world has always had quite a stake in critical discourse analysis. The Duisburg school around Jäger and the Vienna school around Wodak have had a significant influence on critical discourse analysis as a field (Larcher 2015: 38). As the Germans have built up their methodology, it is no wonder that van Leeuwen’s methodology does not find much use in the German-speaking countries, as a mainly English related strategy. Van Leeuwen is, however, not wholly unknown in Germany. The series of articles later turned into a book (van Leeuwen 2008) has started a new branch of discourse studies called “multimodal analysis”. This approach is what van Leeuwen is mostly known for in Germany (Larcher 2015: 45).

3.1. Racism

In the discourse surrounding RASIM, it is worth looking at the definitions of racism. Media, politicians, and activists often use this term in discussions concerning migration. Encyclopaedia Britannica provides a long explanation of racism. However, crucial for this study is the recognition of the term as institutions and systems that perpetuate and reproduce race-based discrimination. Such a definition is close to the one used by van Dijk in his article from 2015 – “a specific social system of domination in which ethnic groups and their members in various ways abuse their power in their interaction with other ethnic groups and their members”. In this view, prejudice and discrimination are sub-elements of racism (van Dijk discusses prejudice as a negative outlook on different ethnic groups and not as a personal attitude). Media, including newspapers, can perpetuate racism in numerous ways, such as by choice of headlines, portraying people of different ethnicities as groups instead of individuals, and by using frames discussed below.

3.2. Frames

A crucial element in the CDA approach is investigating frames used in discourse on immigration and refugees. According to Lakoff and Fergusson (2006), one of the most common frames is the illegal frame. Journalists often use it, and this frame can help to portray migrants as criminals (*illegal immigrants*, *illegal aliens*). It is worth noting that although some consider such terms controversial, they appear in some legal acts (for example, in the USA). This frame dehumanises migrants and is frequently used to describe not only immigrants illegally crossing the borders but also the ones who undergo legal procedures and refugees.

Another essential frame is the security frame, whose purpose is to create a feeling of fear among the public opinion. It is commonly used together with illegal frame when media present

migrants as criminals who are a threat to society (for example, taking the jobs of citizens or migrants being violent criminals). Media often combine these frames with a third one – positive *Us* versus negative *Them*; with this, immigrants and refugees become outsiders, dangerous and threatening, in conflict with the positively portrayed ingroup.

4. Immigrants in other studies

4.1. Definition of immigrant, asylum seeker and refugee

In public discourse, media and politicians often use the terms immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker interchangeably. However, it is crucial to recognise the differences between them. An immigrant is any individual who travels to another country to stay there permanently, regardless of their reasons (for example, economic or fear of persecution). An asylum seeker is an immigrant who wants official, legal recognition as a refugee. This last term is a narrower, legal designation, defined by the United Nations as a person who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (Convention relating to the status of Refugees, 1951)

The distinction between these terms is crucial, as different sides of the political spectrum use these terms to strengthen their narratives (for example, calling immigrants refugees to portray them in a positive light or calling refugees immigrants to show them as a threat).

4.2. Previous studies

The 2010 study by KhosraviNik, a part of a larger project (Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press 1996–2006, the RAS project) investigating the representation of RASIM, covers British newspapers from this period. One of the teams conducted a quantitative corpus analysis of the data, while KhosraviNik focused on qualitative investigation.

KhosraviNik concludes that the word *immigrant* seems to have negative connotations, often involving illegal frames (for example, the use of the phrases *immigrants and crime* or *immigrants and illegality*). On the other hand, *emigrant* seems to be used in neutral or positive portrayals. According to KhosraviNik, the most common strategies used to represent RASIM in these years were aggregation, collectivisation, and functionalisation. These strategies create an image of RASIM as one uniform group. RASIM are often dehumanised with the use of statistics, numbers, or collective nominals. KhosraviNik also notes the use of quantity-based words, such as *huge/many/enormous*, when discussing RASIM; these are commonly used to invoke a security frame – portraying RASIM as a threat, often involving the imagery of *waves of immigrants* and *flood*.

The 2016 article by Bączkowska focuses on corpus analysis of the issue. The data for this work is taken from the SiBol/Port (SBP) corpus, containing almost eight hundred articles from British newspapers. What is different from KhosraviNik's work is that articles in SiBol/Port (SBP) come specifically from broadsheet newspapers (predominantly from the conservative, right-leaning side of the political spectrum; the newspaper "The Guardian" is the only one representing the left-leaning side). Another significant difference is that the newspapers come from 1993, 2005 and 2010.

In Bączkowska's article, we can see that the word *immigrant* has more negative connotations connected with socio-economic issues. It is also worth noting that the word *immigrant* appeared more frequently in later years. However, it only occurred in

conservative newspapers; the changes were small for “The Guardian”. “The Guardian” is known for its investment in social issues. It seems that its interest in the matter stayed relatively stable. In the other two newspapers, the change was significant, showing that the subject of migration became more popular in mainstream media.

In their study, Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) show that many collocations of RASIM appear seasonally; the authors focused on collocations (named by them consistent collocates or C-collocates) reoccurring in more than even annual sub-corpora. The authors found that recurring C-collocates constituted only about 5.4% of all collocations of RASIM. These C-collocates, divided into several categories, provided input on the most common patterns; they were concerned with RASIM entering British territory. Interestingly, newspapers often used water-based words regarding migrants – for example, *pour* or *flood*. Such results correspond with the study by Bączkowska (2016), who writes about the association of the word flow with RASIM. These terms are often used in discourse to negatively portray RASIM as an unstoppable, uncontrollable threat to the public.¹

5. Methodology

The corpus for this study comprises 2066 comments gathered on 10th February of 2024 from 10 articles on the BR24 web page mentioning the “Geheimtreffen”, the previously mentioned secret meeting. The main analysis will be performed on comments from two articles: “Tagesgespräch: Wie denken Sie über ein Verbot der AfD?” [Daily discussion: What do you think about a ban on the AfD?] and “Nach rechtem Treffen: “Hans im Glück” und Miteigner trennen sich” [After the right-wing meeting: “Hans im Glück” and co-owners separate]. This corpus comprises 101 comments. This analysis will be bolstered by the analysis of the

¹ The fragments covering the review of a Critical Discourse Analysis of immigration discourse are part of the master thesis by Tomasz Waś.

full corpus. The other articles are: “AfD distanziert sich von Geheimtreffen mit Rechtsextremen” [AfD distances itself from secret meetings with right-wing extremists], “Nach Rechten-Treffen: Scholz fordert Zusammenhalt der Demokraten” [After the right-wing meeting: Scholz calls for cohesion among the democratic parties], “Rechtes Geheimtreffen: Wofür steht der Begriff "Remigration?"” [Right-wing secret meeting: What does the term “remigration” stand for?], “Nach Rechten-Treffen: AfD-Chefin Weidel trennt sich von Referent” [After right-wing meeting: AfD leader Weidel separates from speaker], “Gegen rechts: Tausende Menschen in Franken auf der Straße” [Against the right: thousands of people in Franconia (protesting) in the streets], “AfD-Verbot: Sinnvoll? Machbar? Gerechtfertigt?” [AfD ban: makes sense? Possible? Justified?], “Rechten-Treffen in Potsdam: AfD stärker involviert als bekannt” [Right-wing meeting in Potsdam: AfD more involved than (previously) known], “Bericht: Vor Geheimtreffen in Potsdam schon Treffen in Schwaben” [Report: Before secret meetings in Potsdam, there were already meetings in Swabia].

The main method of analysis will be the classification of social actors created by van Leeuwen. It attempts to marry many disjointed methods of classification into one coherent system. The categories will be mentioned as they become relevant. Additionally, because the system has been created primarily for English, some categories will need to be altered.

The main two articles are about a local company in Germany, whose co-owner was present at this meeting and a discussion about the possible banning of the AfD. These facts will be relevant to the analysis.

6. Analysis

6.1. Social actors

As previously stated, the two articles discuss a co-owner of a company Hans im Glück, and the distancing of the company and the possible ban of AfD. The first article mentions: Hans-Christian Limmer, Hans im Glück, Correctiv, Rechtsextremen [extreme right-wingers], AfD-Politiker [AfD politicians], Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund [people with a migration background], Mitglieder der “Werteunion” [members of the “Werteunion”], Martin Sellner, Nachrichtenagentur dpa [dpa news agency], Pottsalat, the second article: Rechtsextreme [extreme right-wingers], Unternehmer [entrepreneurs], AfD-Politiker [AfD politicians], Millionen [millions (of migrants)], Politiker aller Parteien [politicians of all parties], AfD, Vertreter der Werteunion [Representative of the Werteunion], Martin Sellner, correctiv, dpa, Bundeskanzler Scholz [chancellor Scholz], Alle [all (Germans)], Christian Dürr, Alice Weidel, Nancy Faeser, “Stern”, Wolfgang Thierse, der Verfassungsschutz [the German domestic intelligence services], Burkhard Körner, Achim Bogdahn, Prof. Peter M. Hube, Björn Dake.

In these briefs, there are numerous different social actors mentioned. How is the situation in the comments? The comments mainly focus on AfD, sometimes migrants; they also use the 1st person pronoun quite often to talk about their own feelings and engage with other commenters using the 3rd person polite form. They also mention Hans Limmer, other parties and many, many different relevant or irrelevant people and concepts.

The original articles do impact the social actors that enter the discussion, however not wholly. One social actor that gets brought up that is not mentioned in the original article is the Nazis. Sometimes they are just identification/overdetermination of the AfD politicians, and sometimes they are literal Nazi party members. Thus, although there is a relationship between the

social actors mentioned in the article and the comments, it is not as direct as one might believe.

6.2. Exclusion

Exclusion is a situation when a social actor is not directly mentioned in an activity concerning them. Van Leeuwen mainly points out the sinister side of exclusion, a side motivated by political concerns (1996: 39-40). It should probably be pointed out that in many cases, exclusion seems to be not malicious but simply an economic choice of the commenter. Let us look at an example:

- (1) Die AfD ist verfassungsfeindlich. Entscheidend für ein Verbot ist die Frage, ob sie ihre Ziele verwirklichen kann (daran ist das NPD-Verbot gescheitert). Ein Verbot können übrigens nur Bundesregierung, Bundestag, Bundesrat beantragen. Die Entscheidung trifft das BVerfG. Sonst niemand.

'The AfD is unconstitutional. The decisive factor for a ban is the question of whether it can achieve its goals (this is where the NPD ban failed). Incidentally, only the federal government, Bundestag and Bundesrat can make the ban happen. The BVerfG makes the decision. No one else.'

In comment (1), the "Verbot" is backgrounded, although the commenter is for such a ban. It is probably an unconscious decision because AfD has already been mentioned in the last sentence. Let us look, however, at the main ways exclusion is realized. This first comment gives us the first clear example; it is the nominalisation or use of process nouns (Van Leeuwen 2003: 40). The data is probably quite skewed, as this ban is one of the main topics of one of the articles (In the second article there is also a call to action, asking commenters what they think about the potential ban).

There are other forms of exclusion mentioned by van Leeuwen, namely passive agent deletion, middle voice and ellipses in a non-finite clause. Let us look at some examples of these:

- (2) Die "Ausgewogenheit" der Berichterstattung muss schon gewahrt bleiben. Oder einfach: links ist immer gut, rechts der Mitte = Nazis.
 'The "balance" of reporting must be maintained. Or simply: left is always good, right of center = Nazis.'
- (3) Absolut verbieten! Diese Leute stehen nicht auf dem Boden des GG, sind keine Demokraten und wollen auch einen anderen Staat. Irritierend, dass die AfD Steuergelder für die Wahlkampfkosten-Erstattung erhält!
 'Absolutely ban! These people do not support the constitution, are not democratic and also want a different state. It's irritating that the AfD receives tax money to reimburse campaign costs!'
- (4) Clever, scheinbar seine Anteile zu verkaufen, bevor die Vorwürfe veröffentlicht werden. Wer weiß, wie viele der Franchisehalter als Kunde den Rücken kehren, wenn sie davon erfahren.
 'Smart to apparently sell his shares before the allegations are made public. Who knows how many franchisees, like customers, will turn their backs once they find out about this.'

The last example gives us an interesting perspective on exclusion. Pronoun usage does not normally exclude actors. There is, however, an argument to be made here. Here, the agent of "verkaufen" is represented through the possessive pronoun "seine", which is an object of the verb. Additionally, the only way to glean who this mysterious pronoun relates to is to read the entire article. As such, these examples will be counted as suppression; although the actor is theoretically there in the clause, they are just very separated from it.

Another wholly original strategy is the usage of the indefinite pronoun "man". There are cases where this pronoun refers to nobody in particular, fulfilling its main purpose. There are, however, also cases where this pronoun is used for subtle jabs towards other commenters:

- (5) Das kann man ganz genau nachlesen, wer unter welchen Bedingungen laut z.B. der AfD ausgewiesen werden soll.

Wenn man sich mal damit beschäftigt, läuft man auch nicht mehr Gefahr, Begriffe nur weil man sie nicht kennt zu verharmlosen. Kann ich ihnen daher nur wärmstens empfehlen. 'You can read exactly who should be expelled under what conditions according to, for example, the AfD. Once you start thinking about it, you no longer run the risk of trivializing concepts just because you don't know them. I can therefore only warmly recommend it to you.'

It refers to the current situation and is an ironic reference to the previous commenter.

Another curious phenomenon, also connected with pronouns, is their omission. It is hard to say whether there is a discursive reason behind that.

- (6) Dieser Laden wird völlig überbewertet. War ein einziges Mal da, weil nix anderes in der Nähe war. Dann kam die Rechnung. Einmal und nie wieder.

'This bussiness is completely overrated. Was there once because there was nothing else nearby. Then came the bill. Once and never again.'

Here, especially before "war", there should be a 1st person pronoun "ich". This might be a result of diachronic processes, which cause the German language to drop certain pronouns in certain environments (Trutkowski 2010: 209). This additionally raises some questions about the specifics of this methodology. If, in a pro-drop language, the verb is finite, but there is no pronoun, should that count as an exclusion or a simple activation? There are some enduring questions about the method when it comes to other languages.

There might be one more relevant example, namely:

- (7) Wieso eine Katastrophe? Das interessiert doch eh nur dir Aktivisten.

'Why a disaster? Only you activists are interested in that anyway.'

The “nur” here seems to reference a group of “normal” people who are, of course, not interested. This would be a curious type of exclusion not realized grammatically but rather purely syntactically. It is also very close to the differentiation category. Whether or not that is a valid approach should be explored further.

Below, we see total exclusions versus total inclusions in the text. This type of analysis will be performed for four social actors: AfD, democratic parties, Migrants and I. It will also include the two types of exclusion: suppression and backgrounding. Suppression is a situation when a person is completely skipped in the text, but their action remains; backgrounding is when they are not mentioned in relation to the activity, but they are there in the text (Van Leeuwen 2003: 41).

Table 1

Included, backgrounded and suppressed social actors

Social actors	Included	Backgrounded	Suppressed
AfD (N=118)	~74%	~21%	~6%
Democratic Parties (N=53)	~58%	~23%	~19%
Migrants (N=18)	~56%	~23%	~23%
I (N=40)	~90%	~8%	~3%

AfD is mentioned frequently across the entire corpus. In all of the 2000 comments, it is mentioned 729 times, which constitutes almost a per cent of all the words in the corpus. It is thus logical that it would be mentioned frequently and excluded frequently. It is, however, excluded considerably less often than the other parties or the migrants.

The migrants themselves, or should they be called the migrants and Germans with a migrant background, are remarkably underrepresented in the corpus. They are also generally excluded far more in comments that directly mention actions connected to them. AfD, in a way, has hijacked the conversation away from the people they want to get rid of onto themselves. The democratic parties also seem to be excluded quite often, although they are very relevant to the conversation. This focus on AfD is probably beneficial for them, like the focus of the media on Donald Trump in the 2016 US election (Confessore et al. 2016).

The “I” is included here as an interesting facet of the comments discourse. 1st person pronoun is remarkably common throughout the entire corpus, being mentioned 517 times.

Probably the most intriguing aspect is the coining of the new term “Remigration”. This term is supposed to mean the sending of different populations of migrants or Germans with a migrant background to their countries of origin. It is mentioned forty-nine times in the corpus and three times in the analyzed part of the corpus. It is, in a way, a masterwork of discourse for the purpose of propaganda. Migration is something that people, by definition, take on on their own accord. Adding the prefix “re-” does not seem to point to anything sinister; it certainly does not point to an expulsion. It additionally, grammatically or even semantically, makes the migrants the agent. Migration has only a goal and an agent, no person forcing you to do it. Thus, it naturally excludes people who will be doing the expelling. German does not help the situation because of the double meaning of the preposition “von”. Let us look at an example:

- (8) Wenn Ihnen bei Remigration von Deutschen mit Migrationshintergrund nur einfällt hier einen solchen Unsinn von sich zu geben, haben sie tatsächlich ein Wahrnehmungsproblem. 'If you can only think of saying such nonsense when talking about remigration of Germans with a migrant background, you actually have a problem with perception.'

In English, we would have a difference between the possessive meaning of the noun and the circumstantial meaning. We would say “remigration of migrants by the government”. In German, both of these roles are fulfilled by “von” “remigration von Migranten von der Regierung”. Thus, it not only excludes the agent by definition, but it also introduces confusion about who exactly the agent is.

6.3. Role allocation

“Activation occurs when social actors are represented as the active, dynamic forces in an activity, passivation when they are represented as ‘undergoing’ the activity, or as being ‘at the receiving end of it’” (van Leeuwen 2003: 43-45). These quite ephemeral labels are bolstered in the article by thematic roles, which is helpful to an extent, but van Leeuwen wants to classify not only sentences but also nominalisations, adjectives etc. There are also significant problems with copula constructions (which usually bring a whole new level of complexity into the thematic role system (von Polenz 1988: 170-172) and direct addressing of the different actors. As such, the system will be forgone; the different occurrences will be tried to classify into just the two categories, additionally noting if they fall outside of the system. These occurrences will be noted for the total number of mentions (in the exclusion/inclusion table) but not for the following table. Additionally, the excluded actors will be skipped here. In van Leeuwen’s classification, these categories are mutually exclusive.

Van Leeuwen mentions three strategies connected to role allocation: participation, premodification and postmodification (mainly possessivation) and circumstantialisation (van Leeuwen 2003: 44). Participation just means a sentence that utilises the thematic roles; it is thus abundant in the corpus. The two other categories are more problematic. Post- or premodification is connected to nominalised verbs or process nouns. There the prepositions or simple possessivation will dictate whether the

actor is passivated or activated (van Leeuwen 2003: 44). Circumstantialisation is simply adding the prepositional phrases starting with “by” or “from” to passive constructions in English (idem: 45), or “von” or “durch” in German, with some others in some cases (Helbig et al. 1988: 173-174). Because, as previously stated, “von” can signify possession and the agent in the passive form, it does make the decision hard in some examples. Pre-modification will also include some compounds like in the following example:

- (9) Ich glaube, dass die "etablierten Parteien" viel zu viel Angst haben vor eben genau dieser Kommunikation. Bürgernähe gibt es da schon lange nicht mehr.
 I believe that the “established parties” are far too afraid of exactly this kind of communication. There hasn't been any connection to citizens for a long time.

As compounding is very common in the German language (Engel 2004: 283), there are quite a few such examples.

There are also some boundary cases connected with copula constructions. If it is the most basic copula construction simply stating that one thing is another, it was not classified in either category:

- (10) Es gibt sehr viele andere Artikel über andere Probleme die dieses Land hat. Das allergrößte Problem ist jedoch diese blaue Partei. Und eine WannseeKonferenz2.0 zeigt das überdeutlich.
 There are many other articles about other problems this country has. The biggest problem of all, however, is this blue party. And a Wannsee Conference 2.0 shows this very clearly.'

There are, however, constructions in German that use “to be” with a preposition or another particle or change its mood:

- (11) Ein Gastronom ist für die Abschiebung von Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund.

‘A restaurateur is in favor of deporting people with a migration background.’

As this indicates a different relationship between the person and the attribute, the subject here will be assumed to be activated.

Van Leeuwen (2008: 44) also introduces two different types of passivation: beneficialisation and subjectivation.

Subjected social actors are treated as objects in the representation, for instance as objects of exchange (...). Beneficialised social actors form a third party which, positively or negatively, benefits from it.

It seems to be completely the same as the traditional notion of direct and indirect objects. Nowadays, it is quite rare to see a traditional label given such importance. Additionally, German is a language with many prepositional objects, which usually form their independent category (Meibauer et al. 2015: 157). As such, the following categories will not be taken into account.

The table below shows the distribution within this category based on activation vs. passivation as presented in the analysed corpus.

Table 2
Activated and passivated social actors

Social actor	Activation	Passivation
AfD (N=73)	~41%	~58%
Democratic Parties (N=29)	~79,3%	~20,7%
Migrants (N=10)	~30%	~70%
I (N=36)	~94%	~6%

AfD is more passivated than activated. It does stay consistent with the representation in many comments. Many commenters frame AfD as a victim of circumstances, which people crowd around because the other parties do not listen to the “people”:

- (12) Ein Verbot der AfD ist Schwachfug. Jetzt wo es an die Pfründe und Posten der Altparteien bei den kommenden Wahlrn geht, fordert man ein Parteienverbot. Durchsichtiger geht es nicht. Besser wäre es, wenn die Altparteien mehr auf den Willen des Volkes hören und diesen auch Zeitnah umsetzen würden.
 ‘Banning the AfD is a nonsense. Now that the benefices and positions of the old parties are at stake with the coming election, people are calling for a party ban. It couldn't be more transparent. It would be better if the old parties listened more to the will of the people and implemented it promptly.’

The situation is not helped by the constant calls to ban AfD, as it makes them seem even more passive. Relatedly, democratic parties are far more activated, usually to present their unwillingness to listen to the “people” or to point out their lack of action against the AfD. Migrants, when they are mentioned, are mainly passivated, becoming an object in most comments. “I” is almost always activated, usually to express opinions. That is mainly relevant for the next chapter.

6.4. Personalisation and impersonalisation

Every other category from now on will relate to personalisation. Impersonalisation is more of a metaphorical (van Leeuwen 2003: 67) category and relates to a situation where people are represented as things closely related to them (objectivation) or connotative meaning related to them (abstraction) (van Leeuwen 2003: 59).

Objectivation is common throughout the text, mainly relating to the various parties mentioned as well as the different companies. Most references to AfD are references to the party, not the people in the party. In a way, there are also cases of double

objectification when “Hans im Glück” (a company) is referred to as a “Frittenbude”, a chip-shop or “Ampel” [traffic lights], which stands for the three-party party coalition in Germany.

The other forms of impersonalisation are not as represented; there are only a few cases of abstraction and spatialisation: “tumben Naturen” [stupid natures] in reference to conservative politicians, “Zulauf” [influx] for voters, “AfD” as a symptom, “Deutschland” for the German society. There is also one very interesting example: “verlängerter Arm des neuen Hauptfeindes UdSSR” [extended arm of the new main enemy, the USSR], which has somatisation and spatialisation at the same time.

The commenters, on the other hand, rarely impersonalised themselves. Van Leeuwen points out that the author of the article analysed in his study impersonalised himself quite often (van Leeuwen 2003: 61). It is probably done in the name of convention and because it lends him an air of authority. The commenters never do that, fully embracing the fact that their comments are just their opinion. Staying on the subject of pronouns, in almost every comment analysed, previous commenters are addressed with the polite form “Sie”. In the 101 analysed comments, the form of “du”, which is a second person pronoun, which is not considered polite, appears only a single time. It does appear more in the rest of the corpus, however.

6.5. Determination and indetermination

In probably the biggest change from the original schema, the distinction between genericisation and specification and determination and indetermination will be omitted. The respective categories are elaborated on by van Leeuwen in the following manner:

The choice between generic and specific reference is another important factor in the representation of social actors; they can be

represented as classes or as specific, identifiable individuals. (van Leeuwen 2003: 46)

Indetermination occurs when social actors are represented as unspecified, 'anonymous' individuals or groups, determination when their identity is, one way or another, specified. (van Leeuwen 2003: 51)

There are two different classifications, which are based on the level of individuality displayed in the text. It should be stressed here that the validity of the original categorization is not questioned. However, it is muddy and not distinctive enough to carry out an analysis. As such, it will be simplified into one category, which will be called determination/indetermination. Additionally, all the classes from the specification will be joined onto determination. Thus, determination will be a situation when a group or an individual is specifically referenced, while indetermination is when a group or individual are referenced very generally.

Indetermination is realised in a few ways in the text, with indefinite articles like "niemand" and "man" or with general references like "Leute" or "Menschen". It does not seem to have much bearing on the overall point.

6.6. Assimilation and individualization

This category describes whether people are referred to as a group or not. Then there are additional categories: collectivisation and aggregation; the former is any group, and the latter is any group representing a statistic (van Leeuwen 2003: 48-49).

Assimilation is extremely common in the comments; 58 of them mention some kind of a group. Individualisation is far less common and mainly references politicians or other relevant persons. There is no individualisation of migrants. However, continuing the trend with the directness and lack of want to impose some kind of authority, aggregation is also remarkably rare.

There are only six references to some kind of quantity, and most of the time, it is a general reference like “viele” [many]. There is only one reference to percentages.

6.7. Association and differentiation

“Association is a situation when the group is represented as an alliance which exists only in relation to a specific activity or set of activities” (van Leeuwen 2003: 50-51). Differentiation, on the other hand, “explicitly differentiates an individual social actor or group of social actors from a similar actor or group, creating the difference between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, or between ‘us’ and ‘them’, as with ‘others’” (van Leeuwen 2003: 52). Both association and differentiation are said to be remarkably uncommon in texts (van Leeuwen 2003: 51-52). The comments are not an exception. There are a few examples of parataxis, which could be classified, but there are almost no explicit ones. Similarly, with differentiation, there are only three potential examples, one of which is the already mentioned comment 7. These categories seem to be thus even less common in the corpus. Whether it is language-dependent or genre-dependent is to be determined in future research.

6.8. Nomination and categorisation

“Social actors can be represented either in terms of their unique identity, by being nominated, or in terms of identities and functions they share with others (categorisation)” (van Leeuwen 2003: 52). As some of the other categories were underrepresented, these categories have abundant examples.

Let us start with the nomination. As mentioned above in the individualisation section, there are not that many individualised people, mainly politicians and related parties. Probably the most striking thing about this is the fact that many of them are referenced informally, without the name. In opposition to the

relative civility shown to the other commenters, non-participating politicians very often do not get this kind of treatment.

(13) Weihenstepan gehört auch zu Müller.

‘Weihenstepan (a company) also belongs to Müller.’

(14) Es gibt sehr viele gute und schlaue Leute in der Partei, leider lassen sie zu oft radikale, wie Höcke, ans Ruder.

‘There are a lot of good and smart people in the party, unfortunately they too often let radicals like Höcke take the reins.’

It seems to not correlate with the stance of the commenters or the side the politician is on; there seems to be a general disdain for them. There are some exceptions, though. Respected historical figures seem to be given at least the name: “Otto Wels” or “Franz von Papen”, but if they are not respected, they will not be given this courtesy: “Hitler” and “Goebbels”. Sometimes, some politicians do get a “Herr” or a “Frau”, especially in the wider corpus.

The categorisation is quite common; the groups are very often referred to by their function or identity, as workers, voters, citizens etc. As van Leeuwen has stated, there are cases where the terms get mixed up. For example:

(15) Die bei diesem unsäglichen Treffen in Potsdam (ich nenne es etwas provokant "Harzburger Front 2.0") diskutierten Massenauweisungen von Asylbewerbern und auch von hier bereits integrierten Migranten zeigen jedoch ganz neue verheerende Dimensionen auf, wohin uns diese Partei führen würde, wenn sie einmal alle Schalthebel der Macht inne hätte (was bitte niemals passieren darf!).

‘However, the mass expulsions of asylum seekers and also of migrants who have already been integrated here, discussed at this unspeakable meeting in Potsdam (I call it somewhat provocatively "Harzburger Front 2.0"), show completely new, devastating dimensions of where this party would lead us if it would once hold all the power (which should never happen, please!).’

In this comment, we have, for example, “Asylbewerber” [asylum seekers], so a functionalization, but also “bereits integrierten Migranten” [already integrated migrants], which points to the functionalization (Migrants), but also to the identification (already integrated).

Overdetermination will be another concept tackled here.

Overdetermination occurs when social actors are represented as participating, at the same time, in more than one social practice. (van Leeuwen 2003: 61)

It is very uncommon in the comments, happening maybe three times. Probably the most clear example would be the “Gastronom” mentioned in the 11. This references Hans Limmer, former co-owner of Hans im Glück. Thus, the commenter, in an ironic statement, tries to diminish him by calling him a restauranter, although his role is much wider.

7. Conclusion

The Van Leeuwen method pertaining to social actors is certainly valid. It permits a level of analysis considerably deeper than just a simple analysis of metaphors or keywords. Its strength lies in the combination of methods. That is seemingly also where its weaknesses lay. It is, in many places, a bit too strict to accommodate different languages. Theoretically, each language should have its unique structure of discourse (Moder 2004: 1-11), and one methodology to analyse it across many languages is needed. German is quite close to English in many regards, possibly also discursively; however, there were still some issues which did not permit the analysis to go as deep as it should.

The analysis provides us with some general as well as more specific results. Although engaged in a political discussion, commentators do not seem to shy away from using the 1st person pronoun. They also seem to approach each other with a degree of politeness. Now, we might attempt to paint the

picture the discourse of the comments is representing. AfD is very often passivated and excluded quite rarely. Their common objectivation shows that they are seen as a monolith, an incidental group for which people vote because they have nothing better. They do not take action; they just exist. This view seems to be somewhat supported by the way their politicians are referenced informally, without names, without respect. “Migrants” in their own issue (the remigration) have become very much excluded. Although everything originated from discussions around them, they are mainly passivated and on the fringes of the conversation.

The “democratic parties” are to be blamed for such a scenario emerging. They are often activated exclusively to show their ineffectuality. Their politicians also get no real respect. This shows us how much our discourse can become hijacked by right-wing talking points.

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