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Discourse in a Nutshell – Key Words in Public Discourse and Lexicography

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Discourse in a Nutshell

Key Words in Public Discourse and Lexicography[1]

Melani Schröter, Reading

There are words that – at certain periods of time – loom large in public discourse; *Globalisierung* would be a current example. Expressions like these play a key role in the related discourse – and studying their use and semantics offers the key to understanding the discourses lurking behind them. Analysing such key words in public debates, however, involves looking at the discursive constellations: Which group uses the word – and does the meaning of the word change relative to the group that uses it? Are there controversies about the meaning of the word and its adequacy? This article gives an overview of key word related research and key word lexicography. The way in which key words are related to discourses will be discussed and methodological steps in analysing the discourse-related semantics of key words will be described. The purpose of the article is to point out the usefulness of the concept and the number of resources available for incorporating the study of key words into teaching in a German Studies context.

1. Key Words in Research: An Overview

Research on key words in public discourse including the lexicography of such key words seems to be a specifically German tradition[2] – starting as early as Otto Ladendorf's *Historisches Schlagwörterbuch* from 1906. One might be tempted to think that the analysis and documentation of single words is a pernickety, somewhat stickler-for-detail – and in that respect perhaps typically German – approach to public discourse, but modern academic literature on key words stresses the way in which key words are related to the broader discourse. Single words play neither the most crucial role in public discourse, nor can they alone explain discursive developments. They can rather be considered as the tip of the iceberg or as discourse in a nutshell – their usage and semantics reflect changes as well as constellations of groups, attitudes and evaluations in discourses. There are different types of publications about key words:

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[1] This article is based on a part of the chapter "Wort" that I wrote (in German) for an introduction to the study of language use in politics: Schröter/Carius (forthcoming).

[2] A similar lexicographic approach in English is the work of John Ayto – some of which allows conclusions with regard to the connection between neologisms and historical development (Ayto 1999) and the relation between euphemisms and public discourse (Ayto 1993, chapters 9-13).

- Articles on single key words, e.g. *Solidarität* (Spieß 2006), *Globalisierung* (Hermanns 2003; Storjohann 2007; Teubert 2002), *Sozialismus* (Liedtke 1989), *soziale Gerechtigkeit* (Girnth 2001).

- Books or articles about key words in specific discourses (Böke et al. 1996; Stötzel/Wengeler 1995).

- Key word dictionaries. Since the 1990s, quite a number of key word dictionaries have been published that are in accordance with the lexicographic criteria for key word dictionaries described by Kaempfert (1990).[3] Key word dictionaries focus either on specific historical periods or on specific issues: Pre-Reformation period (Honecker 2004), Reformation (Diekmannshenke 1994), Thirty Years War (Wolter 2000), Weimar Republic 1929-1934 (Schottmann 1997), National Socialism (Schmitz-Berning 2000), Occupation Period (Felbick 2003), Federal Republic (Niehr 1993 deals with the years 1966-1974; Stötzel/Eitz 2002; Strauß et al. 1989); the discourse about guilt in the years 1945-1955 (Kämper 2007), the discourse of dealing with the past (Stötzel/Eitz 2007).

2. Characteristics of Key Words

Felbick (2003) provides a comprehensive list of key word characteristics, divided into formal, semantic and pragmatic features. In the following, I will focus on the discourse related semantic and pragmatic characteristics.

2.1 Discourse related change and frequency

As society and politics change, so do discourses and within discourses, key words. The following chain of words from the German migration discourse illustrates this change of key words alongside the change of the discourse as a whole: *Fremdarbeiter*, *Gastarbeiter*, *multikulturelle Gesellschaft*, *Integration*. *Fremdarbeiter* was the term used for Polish seasonal workers in Imperial Germany. During the Nazi period, it became a euphemism for forced labourers and it was initially used for the (later) *Gastarbeiter,* until the problematic history of the word was reflected and *Gastarbeiter* became the preferred expression. However, the metaphorical concept of *Gast* does not entail indefinite stay. But many of the *Gastarbeiter* stayed, so that finally – and

[3] However, definitions and terminology vary. The following terms are – among others – in use: *Schlüsselwörter* (Herberg et al. 1997), *Brisante Wörter* (Strauß et al. 1989), *Leitvokabeln* (Böke et al. 1996), *Kontroverse Begriffe* (Stötzel/Wengeler 1995). *Schlagwörter* is the term that is defined best and used most.

belatedly, as a consequence of the Kohl government's refusal to face the reality – at the end of the 1990s the fact that Germany is an *Einwanderungsland* was widely acknowledged. With the concept of a *multikulturelle Gesellschaft,* the idea of different cultures existing side by side emerged. This idea was criticised in recent years, when more emphasis was put on the *Integration* of people from different cultural backgrounds into the German society.

These changes correspond with periods of increasing and decreasing frequency of key words within discourses. The use of the relevant key word increases relative to the intensity of debate of the matter in question. After a while, the explosive force subsides and the use of the key word decreases. It may still be used, but rather as a historical reminiscence of the high frequency period. It may also reoccur in other discourses. A good example of this would be *Berufsverbot* which points back to the 1970s RAF terrorism in West Germany. It expresses a critical view of the *Radikalenerlass*, a regulation that was put in place in order to exclude the so-called 'radicals' from jobs in public service. Once RAF-terrorism and the state's reaction to it was not such a crucial issue anymore, the discourse cooled down and the central key words lost their earlier explosive force and omnipresence. From this point on, they could be used as historical reminiscence of the time when the issue was still 'hot'. However, *Berufsverbot* was revived 30 years later in the context of the German migration discourse. There it refers to the regulations of some federal states that prohibit female Muslims from wearing headscarves when they work as school teachers in public service (cf. Stötzel/Eitz 2002: 64-68).

2.2 Relation to groups and perspectives

Some key words may be associated with a particular group or political party. Even when they are also used by other parties or groups, they might be a more essential part of a certain group's political agenda and profile and more often used by it than by others. *Solidarität* for instance is related to the traditional labour milieu whereas *Sicherheit* is a key word associated with conservative politics, focusing on law and order, on internal security and a strong police force. Key words that are associated with

a party's or group's profile and used by a party as a means of positive self presentation can be called *Fahnenwörter*.[4]

There might be more than one key word referring to the same thing. The different key words then express different perspectives and different evaluations. A more liberal abortion law was seen as verifying the *Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Frau* by feminist groups, whereas it was seen as *Tötung ungeborenen Lebens* by conservative and/or clerical groups. This kind of juxtaposition occurs when there is a word in use that is perceived to entail certain (positive or negative) aspects of the denoted issue, thereby failing to cover other aspects. The group that criticises this failure to cover certain other aspects then tries to establish an alternative expression. The German peace movement for example referred to the *Verteidigungsministerium* as *Kriegsministerium*, indicating that they perceived *Verteidigungsministerium* to be euphemistic. Critics of the unification process used *Anschluss* instead of *Beitritt* in order to challenge the notion of voluntariness expressed in *Beitritt*. In short, critics have tried to establish *Stigmawörter*: words that entail negative evaluations of the issue in question and that denounce the competing perspective on it and try to make it look euphemistic. These tactics can be used the other way around by establishing a neutral or positive alternative to an existing *Stigmawort* as in the case of political correctness. The not altogether unsuccessful attempts of political correctness to establish alternatives for some of the existing expressions for minority groups were based on the perception that these words were spoilt by negative evaluations through decades of social degradation and stereotyping. However, conservative groups ridiculed these attempts and successfully turned political correctness itself into a *Stigmawort* (cf. Frank 1996).

2.3 Semantic complexity

Key words normally denote highly abstract concepts. They therefore have a complex semantic structure and different implications relative to the party or group that uses them. *Globalisierung* for example is a highly abstract concept referring to a number of recent complex developments that affect different domains: the state, the society, the economy, the environment, communication and digital space etc. This semantic

[4] For the terms *Fahnenwörter*, *Stigmawörter* in 2.2 as well as *Hochwertwörter* and *Unwertwörter* in 2.3., see Burkhardt (1998).

complexity is mirrored in the following definitions[5] of globalization. These definitions emphasise different aspects. Thus, globalisation is:

> ... ein Prozess der Überwindung von historisch entstandenen Grenzen. Sie ist daher gleichbedeutend mit der Erosion (also nicht mit dem Verschwinden) nationalstaatlicher Souveränität ... (Elmar Altvater)

> ... die größte wirtschaftliche und gesellschaftliche Umwälzung seit der industriellen Revolution ... (Dirk Messner / Franz Nuscheler)

> ... Intensivierung weltweiter sozialer Beziehungen, durch die entfernte Orte in solcher Weise miteinander verbunden werden, dass Ereignisse am einen Ort durch Vorgänge geprägt werden, die sich an einem viele Kilometer entfernten Ort abspielen, und umgekehrt ... (Anthony Giddens)

The same source (see footnote) includes a definition of *Globalisierung* that is in line with the purpose of this paper: It states that *Globalisierung* is a key word in the first place. This key word is currently omnipresent in public discourse and its implications depend on the perspective:

> Globalisierung ist zu einem Schlagwort geworden, das in politischen, publizistischen und wissenschaftlichen Debatten seit einiger Zeit inflationär gebraucht und dabei einerseits als ‚Bedrohung', andererseits als ‚Chance' betrachtet wird ... (Johannes Varwick)

Key words may relate to concepts that are generally perceived as positive or negative. Key words that relate to positively evaluated concepts like *Demokratie, Frieden* and *Freiheit* can be called *Hochwertwörter*. The positive evaluations entailed in these 'high value expressions' are of general validity, so that it is practically taboo to publicly contradict them. This holds true perhaps even more for their negative counterparts like *Faschismus* and *Diktatur* or *Terrorismus*. Key words referring to concepts that are consensually evaluated as negative can be called *Unwertwörter*. It is especially the use of *Hochwertwörter* that is perceived as empty rhetoric. Fuhs however (1987), analyses the use of the words *Menschenwürde*, *Freiheit*, *Frieden*, *Demokratie*, *Gerechtigkeit*, *Gleichheit* and *Solidarität* in German political party documents and shows that these words are not merely empty phrases. They have different meanings within the parties' profiles. They are not equally weighted within all parties' programmes, and they are connected to the various policy fields in different ways. This shows that even those

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[5] Taken from d@dalos: International UNESCO Education Server for Civic, Peace and Human Rights Education; http://www.dadalos-d.org/globalisierung/grundkurs_1.htm, last access: 24-06-2008.

words that seem to be empty phrases in public political discourse can have principally defined group specific semantics.

In summary, key words are characterised by their relation to societal issues. They have a programmatic content, they are semantically complex and they are related to discourses. They change with discourses and show increased frequency in current debates. In most cases, they are related to perspectives as they entail evaluations and express different views of the world. Key words are often group-specific expressions and their use may allow conclusions as to the attitude of those that use these words in certain contexts – and avoid others.

3. Analysing Key Words

The analysis of key words is concerned with pragmatic rather than lexical semantics. Analysing the pragmatic semantics of a word – in addition to the lexical meaning as described in a 'normal' dictionary – means studying the meaning and the evaluations associated with the use of the key word by certain groups and in certain contexts. This involves looking at a relatively large number of texts, and it certainly requires some general background knowledge about the period, the political landscape and discursive constellations. The following aspects are part of this methodology and should be considered in order to discover the pragmatic semantics of key words.

3.1 Context and quantity

Key words cannot be analysed in isolation from the discourse they are a part of. This means that the study of key words requires discursive contextualisation and a general knowledge of the discourse and group-attitude-constellations within it. Furthermore, the study of key words will be based on a corpus of texts or text excerpts. Some text types are more likely to reflect controversy and to contain key words than others. For example, although it is a 'political' text type, ministerial decrees will contain fewer key words – rather specialist terms – than a politician's TV-statement. The communicative situation will also play a role: In the public arena, politicians talk in a much more controversial style than in cross-party working committees behind doors closed to the public. It is also crucial to look at the groups that use the key word and the way different groups use it, and to be informed about these groups' (political) positions or (likely)

attitudes within the discourse. It is at least these three factors (speaker-group, situation, genre) that need to be considered when choosing a number of texts in order to study the semantics of key words.

In Schröter (2006), I analysed the linguistic strategies of the FDP's election campaign in 2005. A close analysis of the party's election campaign programme revealed the key word *Bürger* to be dominating in terms of quantity. This was surprising for me, as I had expected *Freiheit* to be the most frequent. The FDP promotes the concept of a *liberale Bürgergesellschaft*, stressing the engagement, achievement and self-responsibility of the *Bürger*. The *Bürger* are meant to verify the 'chances' of *Freiheit*: Their engagement and self-responsibility is supposed to substitute state regulation. Other frequently occurring key words that clearly mirror the party's profile were *Freiheit*, *liberal*, *Wettbewerb*, *(Eigen-)Verantwortung*, *Chancen* und *Rechte*. Key words like *Gerechtigkeit*, *Sicherheit*, *Rechtsstaat*, *Umwelt*, *Solidarität* und *sozial* hardly ever occurred. Thus, quantity can support arguments concerning the political orientation of groups or parties.

3.2 Collocations and metaphors

In the same article, I looked at the collocations of the crucial key word *Bürger*. Collocating nouns were *Leistung*, *Engagement*, *Entfaltung*, *Streben*, *(Eigen-)Verantwortung*, *Selbstbestimmung*, *Eigeninitiative*. Collocating adjectives were: *selbst*, *eigen(ständig)*, *individuell*, *freiwillig*, *privat*. These collocations show how the *Bürger* are conceptualised by the FDP: *Bürger* are cells of activity rather than passive targets of state action. The state is meant to interfere as little as possible in order to leave enough freedom from regulation so that the individual *Bürger* is free to develop his/her potential for the benefit of society as a whole. The collocations of *Bürger* in the FDP's election programme give evidence for the linguistic construction of the liberal rationale that emphasises the striving of the individual which will ultimately benefit the whole society.

Metaphors can provide even more important clues regarding the semantics of key words. The key word itself may be a metaphor – like *Gastarbeiter*, or the collocations or variations of key words may involve metaphors – like *Asylantenflut* or *Haus Europa*. On the one hand, these metaphorical concepts pre-structure the way we think about the phenomenon in question. On the other hand, metaphors are also a basis for criticism of

these notions. It was held against *Gastarbeiter* and against those that were in favour of integration at an early stage that one would not expect guests to stay forever. Critical minds pointed out that a guest could expect to be treated better than the FRG's guest workers were. Once a metaphorical concept is in place, it can become highly productive. The metaphor that conceptualises immigration as flows of water (cf. Böke 2002) has produced a large number of single metaphorical expressions involving *(Zu-)Strom*, W*elle*, *Schwemme*, *(Spring-)Flut*, *eindämmen*, *einschleusen*, *verebben*, *versickern*, *versiegen*, *ansteigen*, *anschwellen*, *hereinströmen* etc. This conceptualisation has been criticised because it suggests a threatening situation similar to a natural catastrophe (*Flut*) and the need for protection (*Dämme*) – thus justifying restrictive legislation. By perceiving immigrants only as a mass entity, the persons involved, their fate and motivation for leaving 'their' countries is made oblivious.

Metaphorical concepts can become an indispensable part of a certain discourse, like the conceptualisation of Europe as a house (cf. Musolff 2004). Two quotations may illustrate how productive this metaphorical concept was and perhaps still is:

> Mikhail Gorbachev's *Common European House* always raised heckles (*as anyone who has ever shared a flat with a large, aggressive, rather untidy person with little money will understand*). (Independent, 11-09-1994, quoted with emphasis in Musolff 2004: 134)

> Edmund Stoiber […] plagt eine bedrückende Vorstellung. D*ie Front des europäischen Hauses könnte ein solider Bau in deutscher Wertarbeit sein, Seitenflügel und Rückgebäude aber aus Holzverschlägen und Pappmaché, beigesteuert von den Italienern und Franzosen. Die Deutschen dürfen das Gebäude dann mit ihrem Geld sanieren*. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 11-09-1997, quoted with emphasis in Musolff 2004: 138)

Once a metaphorical concept has shaped a discourse, it can be difficult to avoid it. Thus, criticism often uses the same concept, as Burkhardt does in the following quotation. He points out the contrast between *Belle Etage* and *Souterrain* that belongs to the same metaphorical concept of 'building' that he criticises:

> Die Gorbatschowsche Metapher vom „Haus Europa" z.B. stiftet einen Zusammenhang gemeinsamen Wohnens, von Freundschaft und Nachbarschaft. Über soziale, politische und andere Verschiedenheit zwischen den Wohnungsnachbarn sagt sie nichts. Und doch ist es ein erheblicher Unterschied, ob jemand in der Belle Etage oder im Souterrain wohnt. (Burkhardt 2003: 370)

These examples show how metaphorical conceptualisation both affects and reflects the semantics of the key words; a *flood* of people is a threat; *European cohabitants* need a proper building, a roof over their head and are supposed to come to terms with each

other; a *Gast* was invited, cannot exactly be sent away and is nevertheless supposed to leave sooner or later, he must be treated politely by the hosts and he is expected to behave well. By metaphorical conceptualisation, these aspects become part of the pragmatic semantics of key words.

3.3 Metalinguistic Comments

The most crucial characteristic of key words is that they refer to issues that are controversially debated in the public arena. This does not only add to the complexity of the internal semantic structure; it also triggers metalinguistic comments that are concomitant with the use of these key words. The way key words are commented at a metalinguistic level offers clues as to which aspects of the issue are most controversial. Metalinguistic comments show that there is a public awareness of the role of certain expressions in the related discourse. Thus, these comments are indicators for the existence and for the public awareness of semantic conflict. The following quotation from a newspaper article illustrates an awareness of the pejorative nature of the key word *Asylant* in the German migration/asylum discourse. It also shows an awareness of how the way it is used contributes to these negative evaluations, i.e. by using the water metaphor and by denouncing asylum seekers as people that are not escaping from a threat to their life, but 'only' want to improve it, which was considered as fraud and as an exploitation of the 'generous' German law (*Scheinasylant*).

> Ist eigentlich "ASYLANT" schon ein Schimpfwort? Vermutlich gibt es genügend griffigere Ausdrucksformen von dumpfen Vorurteilen gegenüber Ausländern. „Negativ besetzt" ist jeder mit ASYL gebildetete Begriff allemal, dazu bedarf es keiner Meinungsumfrage. Dafür haben schon die anhaltenden Horrormeldungen über die „Flut" oder den „Strom" von „WIRTSCHAFTSFLÜCHTLINGEN" und „SCHEINASYLANTEN" gesorgt. Diese ASYLANTEN schienen schon seit ein paar Jahren eines der ganz großen Übel zu sein, die es einer Heuschreckenplage gleich, zu bekämpfen gilt. Ob von Ausländern oder Arbeitslosen, von Auswüchsen des Sozialstaates oder von Mißbrauch des Rechtsstaates die Rede ist – irgend jemandem fällt dazu immer das Wort „Asyl" ein. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 22.02.1982; quoted with emphasis in: Jung et al. 2000: 43)

The use of key words is very often accompanied by metalinguistic comments. Some common forms of metalinguistic comments in public discourse are the following (cf. Böke 1996, Wengeler 1996, Niehr 2002)

- Distance markers like inverted commas or 'so-called';

- Attribution; e.g. *echte*/*wirkliche*/*faktische/Schein-/Integration*
- Explications of meaning; e.g.:

> ASSIMILATION oder AKKULTURATION würden das Postulat des AUFGEHENS in der Mehrheitsbevölkerung des Gastlandes bedeuten. Hier würde von eigener Identität nichts oder fast nichts übrigbleiben. Dies ist erklärtermaßen nicht das Ziel unserer Ausländerpolitik. (Eckhart Schiffer, Leiter der Verfassungsabteilung im Bundesinnenministerium, in: Spiegel, 30.09.1991, quoted with emphasis and insertion in: Jung et al. 2000: 127)

- Suggestions concerning the adequacy of reference; e.g.:

> Özdemir [Cem Özdemir, Grüne] bedauerte, daß der Name nicht, wie vorgeschlagen, in INTEGRATIONSBEAUFTRAGTE umgewandelt worden ist. „Die neue Bundesregierung macht eine INTEGRATIONSPOLITIK. Deshalb sollte man den Begriff Ausländerbeauftragte, der in die Vergangenheit weist, auch der Vergangenheit angehören lassen“, sagte Özdemir. (Rheinische Post, 05.11.1998, quoted with emphasis and insertion in: Jung et al. 2000: 129)

As Böke (1996: 46) points out, metalinguistic comments indicate that linguists dealing with public/political discourse do not merely create their object of study, but that the speech community itself considers it relevant in what way ‘the public’ talks about relevant and controversial issues. The way these issues are debated in public is often reflected alongside the discourse itself.

4. Criteria for Key Word Lexicography

Key word lexicons are a supplement to the ‘normal’ dictionaries even though in most cases, they describe words that can also be found in dictionaries. What then is the difference between an entry in a dictionary and a key word lexicon? How do key word lexicons go about describing key words in their discursive context?

To illustrate this, I will use the example of a word that at first glance probably would not strike anyone as a key word at all: d*ie Pille*. Looking *die Pille* (contraception) up in an ordinary language dictionary (*Das Große Duden-Wörterbuch* 1994, Vol. 5: 2553), gives the following information:

> (o. Pl. meist mit best. Art.) (ugs.) kurz für ↑ Antibabypille: die P. nehmen, absetzen; sich die P. verschreiben lassen; die P. nicht vertragen; die P. für den Mann; die P. danach.

In the key word dictionary by Stötzel and Eitz (2002), the following information is given about the key word *die Pille*:

- A short description of the medical development of the pill and its introduction to the pharmaceutical market;
- Information about the historical background: prudishness in the 1950s and the explosive force of the new contraception method;
- The outline of the debate about *die Pille* which focused on the moral implications rather than on the medical impact
- Information about the discursive development from (pejorative) *Anti-Baby-Pille* and the attempt to react with the (euphemistic) *Wunschkindpille* – stressing that the child is planned and wished for – to (neutral) *Pille,* integrating quotations from debate-related texts, mostly newspaper articles.

The added value of key word lexicography to the basic information about meaning and usage given in dictionaries could be summarised as follows:

- Key word lexicography delivers the 'cultural history' of key words;
- It describes the discourses lurking behind such expressions;
- It conveys an idea of what is meant by 'controversy' with regard to language use
- It can be regarded as a linguistic contribution to historiography.

Key word lexicons are mostly organised in alphabetical order, but not always: Strauß et al. (1989) have sub-sections on special types of words such as *isms*; Herberg et al. (1997) is thematically organised. A key word lexicon article in principle includes the following elements:

- A definition of the lexical meaning;
- Information about etymology and/or variants and/or synonyms and/or collocations;
- Concise information about the related discourse and the period of explosive force and increased use of the key word in question**,** information about group specific usage and/or group specific meaning and/or entailed evaluations;
- A description of the period of subsiding explosive force and decreasing frequency of the key word;
- Examples for the use of the key word in public discourse.

This is a general pattern; the articles do not all look the same in every key word lexicon. For example, Stötzel and Eitz (2002) give examples for the use of the word within the article, whereas others have a separate section with quotations from their corpora at the end of the article. Niehr (1993) and Felbick (2003) include reference to discourse-related secondary literature.

5. Conclusion: Why Study Key Words?

The analysis of key words is at the interface of language learning, linguistics and cultural studies.

For language learners at an advanced level, it might be useful and interesting to learn about the discourse-related semantic dimensions in addition to the kind of information they are familiar with when looking up words in dictionaries.

When dealing with particular debates and periods in German history, it might be useful and interesting to look at one or the other key word involved for studying the discursive constellation of the time.

Where sociolinguistic and discourse analytic aspects are part of the curriculum, key words could be studied either in the framework of the study of a specific discourse or when studying language use in public discourse. The study of key words in public discourse can be a way of making students familiar with premises of discourse analysis. The focus on the lexical level, on more specific and recognisable linguistic units makes discourse analysis more accessible, especially in foreign language contexts. Extracts from texts within public discourse could be studied in which key words are used in different ways by different groups and/or in which they are commented at a metalinguistic level.

To summarise, depending on the context (language learning, culture studies or linguistics), the study of key words gives the opportunity to combine a linguistic point of view with the study of political or historical topics, and it could enhance linguistic awareness and critical thinking.

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