

Flüchtlinge, Asylbewerber, and Schicksale - Terminology of Refugee Politics in Germany

The current situation in Germany and Europe has recently been much-discussed due to the arrival of refugees from countries like Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, and Somalia. Germany, under the bold leadership of Angela Merkel - emerged as the leader in helping refugees in Europe. Merkel even was recognized by the Time Magazine as the Person of the Year for her stance on accepting refugees and the Greek bailout. The prominence of the refugee situation has resulted in considerably new coverage of the politics behind refugees and the asylum laws in Germany. I will show how the parties in the ruling government coalition and one emerging right-wing party in Germany consciously adopt language that supports their political positions.

Given the highly changed atmosphere, it is no surprise that politicians have been scrutinized for their use of language. Sieglinde Geisel, a journalist for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, for instance, points out that "Language is a political instrument [...]. How we call all the people that are now coming to Europe [...] has influence on how we treat them."¹ The linguist Elisabeth Wehling agrees with this view and published a book this year, called: "Political Framing: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide to How Your Brain Turns Language into Politics." A similar scholarly discussion can be found in the US as well. Jeffrey Feldman, for example, published a book in 2007 on: "Framing the Debate: Famous Presidential Speeches and How Progressives Can Use Them to Change the Conversation (and Win Elections)."

One word that drives discussions in Germany in particular is the term *Flüchtling*. This term, which translates as refugee, derives from the verb *flüchten* / to flee. The addition of the suffix *-ling* transforms this verb into a noun. The suffix *"-ling"*, however, can be negatively connoted, and is often found as part of derogatory or diminutive words, such as *Feigling* (coward) or *Widerling* (repulsive creep). People, instead, suggest the use of *"Geflüchtete"* (fled ones) or *"Flüchtende"* (fleeing ones).

¹ http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/gefluechtete-versus-asylanten-begriffe-druecken.1005.de.html?dram:article_id=330623

Both are neutrally stating that someone has fled or is fleeing.

It is within this framework, that I analyze the language usage of different political parties in Germany. I will show that the terms used are not always as neutral as they might seem and thus, how speakers consciously or unconsciously select terms to reflect their political position in order to persuade their listeners.

To provide some necessary background information, I would like to give a short overview of the political system in Germany. Germany is a federal, democratic republic with a parliamentary democracy. The power is divided between the judiciary, the executive branch, led at this moment by chancellor Angela Merkel, and the legislative branch comprised of the parliament. The first chamber of the parliament, the Bundestag, is directly elected by the people. Currently, the conservative Christian Democratic Union, its smaller Bavarian sister party - the Christian Social Union, and the more left-leaning Social Democratic Party constitute the German government in form of a somewhat unusual grand coalition between the two most popular parties. The Left and The Greens form the current opposition.

The Alternative for Germany, short: AfD - is neither part of the government nor of the current opposition, it, however, has become increasingly popular. It was formed in 2013 as a reaction to the Euro politics. The party characterizes itself as an alternative to and in dissociation of other parties. The AfD is often labeled as right-wing populist² and is particularly controversial in the light of the current situation due to their harsh stance on handling refugees. The party describes itself as a "party of a new type, that is neither left nor right" and "which does not need an ideological guide." Media pundits and other politicians seem to think differently though. But more about the AfD later. For this study I have chosen to look at the CDU and the SPD because they form the current governing coalition and because they are both positioned close to the political center. I included the AfD as a counterexample due to

2 For example by political theorist Karl-Rudolf Korte. (Korte, Karl-Rudolf. "Die AfD möchte immer Märtyrer sein." Interview by Dirk-Oliver Heckmann. Deutschlandfunk. March 10, 2016. Radio.)

their controversial character and their strong showing in the most recent state elections in March where they were catapulted into the discussion, drawing about 25% of the votes in Sachsen-Anhalt.

For this preliminary analysis I selected six speeches by four representatives from the ruling coalition as well as by two representatives of the AfD. I restricted my analysis to speeches given towards the end of 2015, and another set of speeches held in 2016, after the bomb attack in Paris and after the sexual assaults on New Year's Eve in Cologne, Germany. Both events were allegedly performed by male refugees. The assumption underlying this analysis is that the CDU and SPD representatives use neutral or positive terms to refer to refugees, whereas the AfD, especially their leader Frauke Petry, is taking advantage of the uncertainty of the situation by using a much more provocative language. I also assumed and feared that the language of all parties, would reveal a decrease in sympathy for refugees after the attacks in Paris and Cologne.

But let us take a look at my findings. In order to get an idea which terms are utilized most often, I combined the language used by the parties' representatives. I also looked at the individual linguistic usage but due to the time constraint I will not present these results today. The analysis shows that Flüchtlinge (*refugees*), Menschen (*humans*), Asylbewerber (*applicants for asylum*), and Schicksale (*fates*) were the most often used words for refugees, and Aufgabe (*task*), Herausforderung (*challenge*), Flüchtlingskrise (*refugee crisis*) and *problem* the most frequently used terms to point to the situation itself. In order to find out what these results mean, I consulted the most authoritative dictionary of the German language - the *Duden dictionary*.

First, it can be said that *refugee* seems to be the politically correct term. *Refugee* does not imply assessment or judgment, but instead simply refers to individuals who had to leave their home country due to danger. This term does not say anything about the relationship to the country they seek asylum in, and it also does not give any information about whether the asylum law applies to them or not. This interpretation matches the fact that all three parties used the term *refugee* most frequently. While

refugee or *applicant for asylum* are relatively abstract terms, the word *Mensch* or *human* allows for a direct connection to the people seeking help. It counteracts the process of abstraction and dehumanization. The term calls to mind that these people are humans like us, with reason and feelings, rather than being simply numbers in statistics. Merkel, for instance, makes clear: "The dignity of man is unimpeachable [...] and this is why every human who comes to us, has the right to be treated humanely."³

With this explanation in mind, it is not surprising that both the CDU and the SPD use *human* (*Mensch*) the second most often, right after *Flüchtling*. They support a fair treatment of refugees. Just as little of a surprise is the fact that the AfD does not use the term *human* so often. While the AfD does allow for immigration, ideally the party wants only people that are "qualified and willing to integrate" ("qualifizierte und integrationswillige Zuwanderung".) I have translated this statement from their website which reads: "Seriously politically persecuted people have to be able to find asylum in Germany. Part of a humane treatment, too, is that applicants for asylum can find work here." ("Ernsthaft politisch Verfolgte müssen in Deutschland Asyl finden können. Zu einer menschenwürdigen Behandlung gehört auch, dass Asylbewerber hier arbeiten können.") The emphasis here is that these must be "seriously politically persecuted people" (ernsthaft politisch Verfolgte) and not just people seeking a better life, presumably. Therefore, the AfD's priority does not seem to be helping refugees but to help Germany, its social system, and its labor market.

This interpretation could explain why the AfD did not use the term *human* as frequently and also why the AfD uses *applicant for asylum* so often; it might be their conscious or unconscious attempt to dehumanize the refugee population. The definition of *applicant for asylum* shows that it has not been decided yet if the person is entitled to asylum. So, this term focuses on and asks for assessment. And this is exactly what the AfD suggests: to *assess* refugees in terms of their benefits to

3 "Flüchtlingskrise: Angela Merkel Spricht Auf Der Zukunftskonferenz Am 02.11.2015." *YouTube*. YouTube, 02 Nov. 2015. Web. 24 Nov. 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kX7Cq7Orgk>>. Time: 12:12.

Germany.

Although the term *Schicksale* or *fates* was only used by Thomas de Maizière, a member of the CDU, it is still insightful to set this term into context. De Maizière says: "These actions affect many single fates, different fates, they, for example affect a young man from Eritrea."⁴ To refer to refugees as fates (which is not really possible in English), allows for the development of sympathy and empathy. And what might be most important - it allows for seeing refugees as what they are: innocent victims of war and other political or social problems.

Overall, the analysis of these four terms reveals the potential relevance of particular linguistic usage. It has shown that the governing coalition of CDU/SPD consciously employs language that emphasizes the humanistic aspect while the AfD utilizes more abstract terms. The same conclusion can be drawn regarding the four most commonly used terms referring to the situation itself. These four terms are: *Aufgabe* (*task*), *problem*, *Herausforderung* (*challenge*), and (refugee) *Krise* (*crisis*). Without going into detail, the German terms *Aufgabe* and *Herausforderung*, *task* and *challenge*, have similar meanings. They are relatively neutral and simply ask for some kind of action. *Crisis* is a lot stronger. It means that something needs to be done *soon* in order to avoid negative consequences and possible danger. The term *problem*, on the other hand, clearly stresses the potential difficulties, obstacles and even the possibility of failure. It is striking that the AfD exclusively uses the negative term *problem*. The renouncement of the word *problem* by the governing coalition, however, forms a clear counter-example to that of the AfD. Their agendas, and their ideologies regarding refugees are completely distinct from the AfD. What the CDU and SPD are dealing with is a *task*, something that needs to be and *can* be done. For the AfD the refugee problem is one that may not be solvable and one that is probably better avoided.

4 "Rede Von Thomas De Maizière Zur Bewältigung der Flüchtlingskrise." *CDU Stadtverband Bad Segeberg*. CDU, 21 Oct. 2015. Web. 20 Nov. 2015. <<http://www.cdu-bad-segeberg.de/2015/10/21/rede-von-thomas-de-maiziere-zur-bewaeltigung-der-fluechtlingskrise/>>. Time: 2:10.

In my analysis I also considered language use before and after two critical moments in the recent past – the Paris bombings in September and the sexual assaults on German women on New Year's Eve in Cologne. Overall, I could identify two significant changes. The CDU, in particular Angela Merkel, used the term *human* following the Cologne attacks even more prominently than they did before the attacks. They appear to be emphasizing the human aspect in order to prevent generalization and resentment against refugees. The other observation I made, concerns the AfD. After the incidents in Cologne, they mainly talked about *refugee politics* or *asylum laws* in general rather than about refugees in particular. And this, in fact, can have many reasons. The first possibility is that the AfD simply tries to sanitize their language. Now that they have gained popularity and votes, they do not need provocative language anymore in order to call attention to themselves. If anything, they need to use politically correct language if they want to be taken seriously by the media and other politicians.

My other theory is that now, after their success, they go one step further, and utilize the refugees to attack the other parties, and point out what the governing coalition is doing wrong. This, in fact, has been a common theme in the speeches and interviews AfD leader Frauke Petry was involved in. She, for example states that "The AfD's development [...] shows that we address the problems that other parties have withheld for too long."

And all this can be found here in the US as well. Presidential candidates, some obviously more than others, address and stir up primitive fears directed at "others" too in order to get votes. These others then might not only be seen as threats to our lives, culture, and well-being but they might also put us at a disadvantage, and - most famously - "take away our jobs".

What I hope to have shown today is that the German terms used in the refugee discourse in Germany are, indeed, not as unbiased as they seem. The analysis and interpretation of allegedly neutral terms such as *applicant for asylum*, *refugee crisis* or *problem* has clearly demonstrated this. What, too, has been proven, is that the specific language used by politicians is usually in close accordance with

their political agendas. This became particularly obvious in the case of the AfD and their exclusive and consistent use of the word *problem*. It is challenging to formulate a recommendation as to how to deal with these findings. None of the terms I analyzed today are inherently bad. It does not make sense to simply ban them. Nevertheless, the consistent use of certain terms can also influence the audience's opinion on refugees, since it is language that shapes and creates our world. Someone who only hears about *problems* and abstract *applicants for asylum* will likely develop a negative opinion - or their pre-existing negative notions will be reinforced. The opposite might likewise be the case if refugees are always connected with the terms *humans* and *fates*.

What is left to do then, is to develop a critical understanding and to always factor in who is speaking and for what purpose. It is necessary to question which goals politicians, parties - or any other speakers for that matter - are trying to pursue and which reactions they hope to receive. Ultimately, we must not allow for language to build up the walls and borders in front of those in need, whose construction many people are so desperately trying to prevent in the outside world.