

20. Feb. 2013

von benkamis

in Sicherheitskultur

Kommentare ( 4 )

## Security Culture: Lost (and found) in Translation

von Ben Kamis

Autobiographical note: I spend about two and a half hours nearly every workday in trains or train stations on my commute to enjoy the company of the other contributors to this blog and some other esteemed colleagues. My point isn't to highlight my own martyrdom, though I appreciate your sympathy, just that I have a lot of time to observe how very careful people, i.e. German professionals, deal with very dangerous activities, like waiting next to, climbing aboard, and standing in steel vehicles weighing several hundred tons and moving very fast as well as the perilous rudeness of their peers.

One of the things that's often puzzled me is that, in addition to the normal *Schaffner* who check tickets, there is also a large contingent of railroad personnel who wear dark blue uniforms, military-style berets, Batman-style utility belts with gloves and pepper spray and the other implements of semi-official coercion, and on their backs there is a large red stripe with white lettering that reads "DB-Sicherheit". DB, of course, stands for Deutsche Bahn, the mostly state-owned railroad enterprise, and I always translated 'Sicherheit' to what I always considered to be its English equivalent, 'security'. This inference usually makes sense because many of these DB-Sicherheit personnel are well-built young men who **look like Russian bouncers**, and their job seems to consist of ferreting out winos, troublemakers, and *Schwarzfahrer* (freeriders, literally but romantically, 'black riders') from DB trains and stations. Many of the DB-Sicherheit personnel, however, are still patrolling the platforms with the arthritic gait of proto-pensioners and the girth you'd only expect to see in upper management. After seeing several dozen such Bahn employees who look more likely to suffer a coronary than manhandle an aggressive drunk, I began to question what kind of Sicherheit/security was really being provided here.

Then, recently, I saw a DB-Sicherheit officer (patrolman? constable? professional? worker?) with the shape and agility of an oversized penguin, and the white cross of a first aid kit on his belt caught my eye, because it was at the very center of his geometric shape. And then, far too late for the amount of time I spend thinking about semiotics, it hit me: *Sicherheit* doesn't only mean 'security'; it can also mean 'safety', which is a very different concept indeed.

### SOCIAL MEDIA



### SUCHE

### TWITTER FEED

Ben Kamis: The concept of #cyberpeace is linguistic trolling. Cyberpeace: post-war is war, only more so <http://t.co/fkaHhcgekK> #cyberwar  
ungefähr 3 Stunden her von &s

Wer wissen will was #cyberpeace ist, sollte wissen was dieser sog. #cyberkrieg ist: Matthias Schulze dazu bei uns <http://t.co/LyvFdE29dN>  
8. Dezember 2014, 11:08 von &s

Neue #Jobs für Politikwissenschaftler\_innen!  
<http://t.co/f3vSzfJpMG>  
5. Dezember 2014, 9:03 von &s

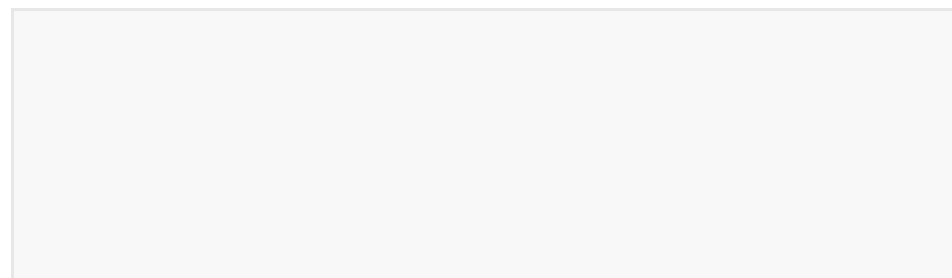
### TAGS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2y8Sx4B2Sk>

Some non-native speakers of English might not really see the difference, and some English-speakers might never have thought about it, so let's differentiate. A weak border or a disloyal employee could be security risks, and a wet floor or faulty brakes in a car compromise safety, but each term looks odd when placed in the other contexts. My computer's dictionary defines 'security' as "the state of being free of danger or threat" and a few other examples that would all seem to apply – falsely – to the brakes and wet floor.\* The definition of safety is not much better, saying basically the same thing but including the condition of being unlikely to *cause* harm or injury, which would also include a solid border. The real condition that separates the two seems to be that safety refers to a passive defence against risk, but there must be a contrived normative system in place to defend against risk in order for 'security' to come into question. So a disloyal employee who violates a company's or government's information policy is a security risk because there is a policy to prevent that risk, even though s/he doesn't necessarily make anyone unsafe. Ditto permeable borders. An overweight sexagenarian is not capable of providing for very much security in the sense of actually enforcing policies, but being in the right place at the right time with a first aid kit can provide more safety.

As someone who also spends a lot of time conversing in a foreign language (and for those who know what Schwäbisch is, conversing as a foreigner in a foreign language within a foreign language), I'm hypersensitive to the boundaries of communicability between discourses. You think you know what a word means, and you don't realize that you don't until somebody giggles unexpectedly or responds to your benign comment with a look of disgust. And this outsider status forces me to wonder: how do Germans understand 'Sicherheit'? Is a Sicherheitskultur one that works to protect people from danger, or does it exist to prevent transgressions against a more or less explicit system of 'protections'? Since the German language has only one word for both concepts, the outsider immediately suspects that this will affect how German speakers will understand 'Sicherheit' when they hear it. Whereas 'security risk' in English always implies some aspect of transgression, whether justified or not, an *unsafe* wet floor just sits there, being wet, not making any statement against anybody.

So how might this matter? Well, think back to the decade or so after WWII when the Ministry of War went extinct as a species, only to be replaced by the virtually identical Ministry of Defence. 'Defence' sounds so much less aggressive and so much more compliant with the UN charter than 'war'.



BELIEBT KOMMENTARE NEU

Hell yeah, it's Political Science!  
Wissenschaftliche Podcasts

Das Internet darf ein cyberfreier  
Raum sein

Deutschlands Irak-Politik –  
Verantwortung nach außen,  
Intransparenz nach innen.

Wir haben Geburtstag!

It's not Cyberwar, stupid!

## KATEGORIEN

Außenpolitik (59)

Bürgerkriege (16)

Cyber Security (42)

Demokratisierung (9)

Drohnen (15)

Humanitäre Interventionen (15)

Innere Sicherheit (24)

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Katastrophen (4)

Konferenz (20)

Militär (28)

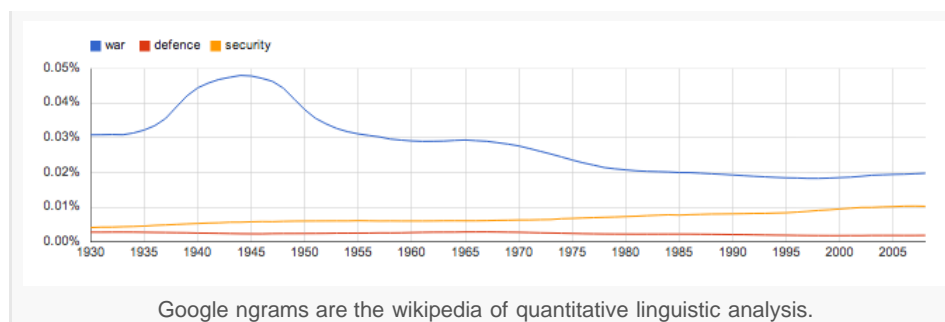
Pandemien (2)

Podcast (7)

Popkultur (21)

Sanktionen (8)

Security Culture (14)



Though it's very cheap empirical data, I ran a google ngram to see how commonly 'war', 'defence', and 'security' have appeared in books between 1930 (for pre- and post-war control) and 2008 (the most recent year available). The popularity of war has stood up surprisingly well, but as expected, 'security' went from being about as rare as 'defence' at the beginning of this period to far more popular.

So 'security' is probably catching up to 'war', because 'war' is something people in the English speaking discourse like to notice and criticize other people doing, but don't like doing themselves, and 'security' is less objectionable. (NB: 'cyberwar' might be an exception to this aversion, perhaps because of its virtuality, and perhaps because of what the state needs to perpetuate itself as an institution – something **like this**.) But why is 'security' becoming so much more popular than 'defence'? The paranoid view, which is useful when applied to coercive institutions even if it's wrong, would be that *defence* implies some transitory or temporary threat; threat appears, then you defend, then when you overcome it you go back to whatever you were doing before. But *security* is a permanent and desirable condition. You can turn the defence switch off when you don't need it, but you never want to turn off the security switch. Now let's get back to 'security' (i.e. normative system backing it up) vs. 'safety' (i.e. passive condition of low risk). Following the logic of whether the condition needs active management and can be turned off, safety is maybe not a bad thing as a permanent condition or goal, but constantly working towards greater security implies reinforcing the normative system on which the concept rests. Taking this back full-circle to the DB-Sicherheit employees, if they're around to prevent accidents (i.e. promote safety), then that sounds fine, but if they're around to enforce the policies of a quasi-public organization (i.e. promote security) with coercive means like zip ties and pepper spray, then that sounds kind of fishy – more like that wonderful English neologism, 'rent-a-cops'. If they're rent-a-cops, we need to start asking tricky questions about authority and legitimation.

So it might be necessary, when analyzing the discourse about security and its cultural roots and effects, to first realize that there are several *different* discourses approaching some more or less coherent semantic field from different vectors, and to realize where in this array of vectors one's own concepts are located. Otherwise, you might end up expecting physical protection from someone only able to apply a band-aid or overlook how a government ostensibly selling you a permanent state of safety is in fact convincing you to buy a narrative of rectitude and transgression.

Sicherheits-Kommunikation (14)

Sicherheitskultur (205)

Sozialwissenschaft Online (57)

Stellenangebote (42)

Strategie (10)

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Umwelt (1)

Versichertheitlichung (22)

Visualisierung (5)


Whistleblowing (8)

WikiLeaks (17)

WMD (10)

Zivilgesellschaft (48)

## BLOGROLL

 Arbeitskreis soziale Bewegungen

 Augen geradaus

 Dan Drezner

 Dart-Throwing Chimp

 David Campbell

 de.hypotheses.org

 Demokratieforschung Göttingen

 Duck Of Minerva

 Future and Politics

Hylaeen Flow

 Internet und Politik

 IR Blog

Just Security Blog

The Slovaks have a beautiful proverb: “with every new language you learn, you gain a new soul’. And it’s fairly true. Although it’s not exactly true that you can only think in terms of language (proof: when you know what you want to say, but you can’t think of just the right word, *le mot juste*), it is true that linguistic variety opens up different possibilities. The difference between *Verstand* and *Vernunft* is apparently one of the basic distinctions in Kant’s philosophy, but to be honest, I only have a vague and untrustworthy idea of what the difference might be. Most Germans, however, seem as comfortable with it as I would be with ‘safety’ and ‘security’. In other words, **the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** is on the right track, and looking at the interfaces between languages brings out interesting aspects of it.



Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: I think, therefore jIH oH!

In light of the ways that different languages highlight different aspects of concepts, the Deutsche Bahn actually provides a comically ironic example. The DB **has been mocked before** for using too many English terms for marketing purposes (this is just part of a broader, **asinine trend**). Using ‘Kiss & Ride’ to denote a drop off zone understandably confounded both English and German customers. However, it seems that English might actually be *the better language* to use for DB Sicherheit, because it allows for the distinction between ‘safety’ and ‘security’. So the DB confused people with English for the purposes of marketing when they could have been clear in their own language, and they confuse people with their own language when they could be clear with English – unless of course subliminally perpetuating their own normative system of taboos and transgressions is the whole point, and which would be a scary culture for a company that only exists to move people and things around.

\*To Germans used to consulting a Duden for the rules of language, saying a dictionary’s definition is false might seem very bizarre and pompous. Germans tend to think of language in very prescriptivist terms, trusting in the fact that there’s a competent, authoritative body somewhere that knows



[justsecurity.org](https://justsecurity.org)

[Killer Apps](#)

[Kings Of War](#)

[netzpolitik.org](https://netzpolitik.org)

[perception](#)

[shabka.org](https://shabka.org)

[Terrorismus in Deutschland](#)

[theorieblog.de](https://theorieblog.de)

[Verfassungsblog](#)

[Vom Bohren harter Bretter](#)

[whistleblower-net.de](https://whistleblower-net.de)

## ARCHIV

Wähle den Monat

the answer. English is a beautiful mongrel of a language, and it only makes sense to analyze it descriptively, i.e. in observing what people can effectively do with it instead of trying to tell them how to do what they're doing already. I disagree with what the dictionary is telling me, but if people reading this can understand what I'm saying, that is proof enough of my – and their – competence to have an informed opinion.

« [Stellenanzeigen Februar 2/2](#)

[Podcast #4: Gespräch mit Juli Zeh](#) »

## 4 Kommentare zu “Security Culture: Lost (and found) in Translation”

MyDuCa | 20. Feb. 2013 um 13:24 |

nice one! thanks 😊

#1

ANTWORTEN

Jules | 21. Feb. 2013 um 9:38 |

I enjoyed reading your text.

I wanted to add that at least in computer science one differentiates the concepts of security and safety, whereas security is the protection against external threats (such as an attack) and safety against internal threats (such as failures etc).

I agree with you that in reality DB Sicherheit may not be able to provide security but safety. However, I think DB Sicherheit sees itself as to provide security – even if they may fail to do so 😊

#2

ANTWORTEN



benkamis | 21. Feb. 2013 um 11:04 |

You make an interesting point with the computer security discourse. Not only are there differences in how concepts are perceived *between* languages, but there are also differences between different groups of speakers *within* a language. It hadn't occurred to me, but it's got Wittgenstein written all over it. Good call. In that light it would be interesting to ask to DB-Sicherheit employees what they think they're providing and how they see their proper role. Do they consider *themselves* to be more like helping hands or enforcers?

#3

ANTWORTEN

Jules | 22. Feb. 2013 um 9:28 |

Great!

#4

Once I had the opportunity to talk to someone working at DB-Sicherheit, and he told me that from his perspective he sees himself as kind of security *guard*. I think they have to see themselves as enforcers, since they are paid for enforcing the DB `house` rules.  
The perspective of helping hands seems more to be a side effect.

ANTWORTEN

## Einen Kommentar hinterlassen

Name

Email

Webseite

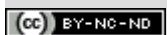
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