

# The War on Terror Discourse and the German-Speaking Press

“or Harry Potter and the Thief of Baghdad”

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“In Harry Potter verzeichnet das Böse einen erschreckenden Machtzuwachs - natürlich haben wir bei der Festung Askaban an Guantanamo gedacht”  
(Süddeutsche Zeitung, 01.06.04)

“Da hatte der Dieb von Bagdad soeben Kuwait gestohlen.”  
(Süddeutsche Zeitung, 19.09.02)

## Introduction

“War writes its own language” (Chin, 2003)  
And the war on terror is no exception. Not only have new lexical items been created, but others have been revived (eg. **friendly fire**), revitalised (eg. **embedded**) or relexicalised (eg. **rendition**). The problem facing German-speaking publications is how to translate these items. Do they choose the lexemic equivalence and thus talk about **außerordentliche Wiedergabe**, which bears no resemblance to the enhanced interrogation techniques known as **extraordinary rendition**? Or do they add an ideological slant and translate **waterboarding** with the malphemism **Scheinertränkung**?

The aim of this study is to examine the way in which “loaded” language used in the war on terror discourse is treated by the German-speaking press and to determine whether the choice of lexical item is determined linguistically or ideologically.

## Methodology

- Build 48 million word corpus (LexisNexis websites)
- Interrogate corpus (WordSmith 4.0)
- Find discourse prosodies and semantic preferences
- Interpret findings

“Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there”  
(Bush, 20.9.01).

## En-route to Baghdad (11.9.01 to 19.3.03)

Example: Axis of Evil **Achse des Bösen**

In the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001, President Bush declares a **war on terror** and vows to lead a **crusade** to rid the world of **evil-doers**. The first phase of this is **Operation Infinite Justice** which causes offence to Muslims and so is renamed **Operation Enduring Freedom**. The US is supported by the **coalition of the willing**. In 2002 he refers to the **rogue states** Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an **axis of evil**.

- Axis of evil entails a number of concepts:
- Indicates new “Axis Powers” are enemies of America
  - Portrays God on the side of the US in fight of Good vs. Evil
  - Appeals to religiosity of US electorate
  - Helps construct narrative of the evil Other

“[...] fiel übrigens zum ersten Male das Wort von der ‘Achse’ Berlin-Rom, das ich im Hinblick auf das Bild des europäischen politischen Wagens gebrauchte, der auf dieser ‘Achse’ ruhe und von den beiden Rädern Faschismus und Nationalsozialismus vorwärts gefahren werden müsse.” (Frank)

A lexemic rendering is available and used. German usage shows both pragmatic and ideological alignment with the US. The main discourse prosody shows detachment from the past because of the connotations of Hitler and totalitarianism. Underlines that the US is no longer an enemy.

## Live from Baghdad (19.3.03-1.5.03)

Example: Embedded **eingebettet**

In the absence of a **smoking gun** or **weapons of mass destruction**, the US decides to take **pre-emptive action** against Iraq. Donald Rumsfeld believes the offensive will be a **cakewalk**. The media are with the troops in anticipation of the shock and awe of **Operation Iraqi Freedom**. The US drops **daisy cutters**, **bunker busters** and **smart bombs** but suffers some casualties as a result of **friendly fire**. Bush declares the end of the war against a banner of **mission accomplished**.

- Concepts entailed depends on speaker attitude:
- The media are protected by the troops
  - The war is stage managed vis-à-vis the mosque shooting and then the rescue of Jessica Lynch
  - The term is a euphemism for censorship and propaganda

A lexemic rendering is available and used. **Eingebettet** relexicalises during war, such that it has the same entailments as the Anglo-American equivalent. There is the additional suggestion that the war is played out like a Hollywood film or the ultimate TV-reality show. Before the death of Christian Liebig (Focus Reporter) there is evidence of “protection” and “stage management”. After his death, there is a clear semantic preference for propaganda and all that it entails. After the war, the term delexicalises and resumes its core meaning.

## Leaving Baghdad (2.5.03 - present)

Example: extraordinary rendition **Verschleppung**

After the war Colin Powell issues a **deck of cards** with pictures of the most wanted ‘villains’. French fries are renamed **freedom fries** because of lack of French support. Insurgency flares up in Fallujah, resulting in **Operation Phantom Fury**. Failure to win the **hearts and minds** of the Iraqi people leads some to believe that it is another **quagmire** like Vietnam. Condoleezza Rice refers to Iran, North Korea, Burma, Zimbabwe, Belarus and Cuba as **outposts of tyranny**. Evidence emerges of the **extraordinary rendition** practice which involves **stress and duress** techniques known as **torture lite**, which includes **waterboarding**. The **enemy combatants** are taken to Guantanamo or one of the **black sites** in countries that do not comply with UN torture conventions.

Extraordinary rendition

- is a euphemism
- is legitimised through back and front clipping → extradition
- underlines religious discourse of the White House

“Pentagon ... denied that they use torture ... declined to comment on the techniques they use ... but a senior Pentagon official said ... interrogations conducted by the Pentagon followed ‘well-established techniques’ that do not violate ... human rights”  
(The New York Times, 18.12.03).

A lexemic rendering is available but it is not used since it would be meaningless within the context. All the euphemisms relating to the extraordinary rendition programme are translated either with malphemisms or with malphemistic paraphrases, which connote totalitarianism through the Gestapo and the Stasi. “All news is local news”. The German press is concerned with the duplicity of the government and its role in the rendition of a German citizen. The Austrian press uses the CIA-flights to resurrect the Eurofighter debate.

## Conclusion

“You shall know a lot about a word by the company it keeps”  
(Firth, 1957)

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, only linguistic constraints prevent full translational correspondence. By the end of 2006 there is full pragmatic alignment but no attempt at linguistic or ideological alignment.

The German-speaking press is more concerned with distancing itself from its past than from the discourse surrounding the war on terror.

Levels of discourse prosody



Die Warlords regieren wie eh und je. Bin Laden und Saddam Hussein bleiben verschwiegen. Bei den Gefangenen in Guantanamo sind alle Gesetze, Menschen- und Kriegsrechte außer Kraft gesetzt, es herrscht reine Willkür der USA. Das Handels- und Bilanzdefizit der Supermacht wird durch ausländische Geldgeber inanziert, die beim nächsten Crash mit in die Tiefe gerissen werden. Der “Dieb von Bagdad” ist wieder zu Hause und lässt sich als erfolgreicher Staatsmann umjubeln.

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