



# HOW TO STRENGTHEN THE VOICE OF CIVIL SOCIETY WITH THE STRATEGIC USE OF LANGUAGE: LINGUISTIC DISTINCTION AS A DISCURSIVE STRATEGY IN A CRISIS

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Civil society movements, such as Occupy, often fail to speak in a coherent voice and create majorities in the public sphere, even though crises provide fertile conditions for establishing alternative views. To ensure that their perspectives are heard, civil society actors must find a common counter-language that represents the essence of their perspectives. They also need to translate those words into languages that will reach citizens beyond the English-speaking community.

The Western world remains mired in crisis. Despite this, Occupy, the most important protest movement focused on the economic crisis, effectively has disappeared. The camps have been dismantled. Demonstrators have gone home. But the vanished camps do not evince vanished ideas. Critical thought persists. What remains of Occupy is the name and the networks of people who wish to continue working on an alternative vision for the world.

The crisis has led to a loss of orientation. Political actors have responded with hasty solutions that are already on hand. This has led us to return to well trodden paths; we now are travelling even faster, often without stopping for directions. But this lack of direction since the crisis nonetheless offers new possibilities. Society is looking for things to salvage, for better alternatives. For this reason, crises provide civil society actors with opportunities to spread their views more effectively and assemble majorities. In the face of Occupy's decline, civil society actors are seeking suitable communicative techniques to shape the discourse spread their perspectives. In essence, they seek what Teun A. van Dijk has named a "discourse strategy". The selection of a discourse strategy depends on a number of factors – the actors themselves, the information they wish to communicate, their opponents and target groups, and other issues on the public agenda. This article illuminates a few key strategies that civil society actors so far have neglected.

It should be the goal of civil society actors to turn a crisis – such as the current financial, economic and euro crisis – into a *discursive* crisis. In contrast to crisis discourses, in which a crisis is merely discussed, discursive crises lead to a change in collective perspective. The nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl in 1986 became a discursive crisis over the course of an international debate, which led to a collective change in mentality in Western Europe. Accidents and crises do not lead necessarily to a change in mentality. The Three Mile Island accident in Pennsylvania in 1979 did not change attitudes towards nuclear power. Both examples have been examined in-depth

by Siegfried Jäger in 2009. Similarly, the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in April 2010, which caused an environmental catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, had little effect on attitudes towards oil, even in the affected area. A “financial crisis” is foremost an event around which a crisis discourse emerges. It is only when alternative perspectives are established and the dominant terminology is questioned that a discursive crisis emerges.

According to Jäger, discourse is the “flow of knowledge through time”, and knowledge flows in the form of language through time, as knowledge is stored in language and people exchange knowledge through language. If one wants to change a society’s knowledge, one must start with language. Questioning dominant terms requires the creation of alternative terms. Alternative terms can be made accessible for the public through a critical use of language. The central thesis of this article is that the strategic use of language increases the likelihood of turning crises into *discursive* crises.

In the current crisis, civil society actors have adopted ways of making themselves heard in the public square. Activists take their opponents to court, produce press packages and flyers, and organise campaigns, demonstrations and flash mobs. All of this ensures press attention. But this is the second step. The first involves creating a unique protest language to distinguish oneself from the dominant terminology.

As Humberto R. Maturana puts it, every utterance is made from a point of view, and the words we choose are perspectival. When people select words, they make distinctions about the world and make it perceivable and communicable. One draws distinctions with words. Am I against an “expansion of the EU’s powers” or am I against “reducing national parliaments’ powers”? Genetic engineering versus genetic improvement; plant protection products versus pesticides; weeds versus wild herbs: All of these terms describe the world from a particular perspective. Civil society actors lack the terminology to adequately describe their own and their opponents’ actions.

Language has internal and external effects. It serves self-perception and perception by others in equal measure. Within this process, language performs a steering function. Words are signposts that provide orientation.

The selection of words tells us *who* speaks. The alternative knowledge of alternative movements is concentrated in discourse-dominating key words (freedom – equality – brotherhood). Hence, it is not sufficient for civil society actors to describe their own views in the form of resolutions, as these resolutions do not reduce the

complexity of the situation. It is important for actors to put forward their perspectives in the form of key words, as only this will allow others to consider these views within *everyday communication*, outside of expert discourse, and thus build majorities.

The recognisability of an alternative perspective in discourse depends on its distinctiveness. One draws a line between one's own and an opponents' use of language by using a distinct counter-language. In this way, people and movements make themselves distinguishable. Anyone who wishes to critique the financial system should not use the word "sustainability" if banks already use it in their advertising. Sustainability is a positively perceived word that many actors have adopted.

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This adoption is based on the reverse strategy of *linguistic distinction* – what Eric M. Eisenberg named *strategic ambiguity*, the phenomenon of achieving consensus by using prestige words not clearly defined. Shirly Leitch and Sally Davenport have presented examples of companies that associate "sustainability" with *economic* sustainability and organic farmers who refer to sustainability as the preservation of the natural world. Since there is one word but several different meanings, "sustainability" blurs the boundaries between the opposing perspectives in public communication. In this case there are two options: either seek out a new word or defend the usage of that same word. In environmental discourse, civil society actors defend their language with the word "greenwashing" to criticise their opponents' co-option of the word "sustainability".

A central problem of the Occupy movement was not that the movement had too many goals. Rather, everyone in Occupy voiced these goals with different language. Occupy failed to follow a common semantic thread. Everyone who was questioned shared the same opinion; they just expressed it differently. A phrase used by one person irritates another, who would perhaps have preferred to emphasise other matters. This inability to collectively formulate a critique and agree on language rules was the result of Occupy's self-conception, which was based on the absence of hierarchy. This kind of self-conception

makes it difficult, though not impossible, to agree and unite. The Pirate Party in Germany faced similar problems. Members came to prominence on a wave of sympathy but wasted the trust bonus they had, as they were not in a position to coherently verbalise their topics. They were not able to distil a unified message that they all could stand by from the multiplicity of voices. It is necessary that everyone who offers alternative perspectives understands the importance of a common protest language. The absence of common language has several negative consequences. The movement's followers will be irritated by the lack of a common linguistic reference point. The absence of a common language prevents other actors from adopting this alternative way of thinking. It also affects discourse multipliers such as members of the mass media, whose reporting requires them to transmit a coherent image. When the objects of their reports prevent this, they often produce coherence through irony. In the case of Occupy, this led to headlines and commentary that depicted participants as freaks, losers and lost causes.

If they wish their perspective to be taken seriously in the long term, civil society actors must develop and use an encompassing critical language that distinguishes their usage of language from that of their opponents. A distinct critical vocabulary enables people to think within the perspective on offer and integrate it into *everyday* communication using this vocabulary.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF ALTERNATIVE REALITIES

How an actor translates her perspective into language depends not only on individual key words, but also on the metaphors and stereotypes used. This usage also should differ from the language of opponents. Actors have two options for clarifying their perspectives when selecting linguistic images: the positive linguistic construction of their own standpoints and the negative linguistic construction of the opposing standpoints. Each alternative idea should clarify what it opposes. It should name scandals and construct dystopias out of them, asking, for example, “Do we really want to live like this?” The point is not to generate panic. It is to go beyond expert discourse to make one’s own perspective clear. It equally is important to construct a utopia and point to a positive alternative. Ideally, the dystopia and the utopia should be connected in a coherent narrative, or story. Stories are an important human way of knowing, which is neither

polemic nor simplistic. They are necessary for the comprehensible communication of themes. The standard accusation, “But it’s more complicated than that”, does not apply here, as the opposing side also constructs the “good” and “bad”. If one looks at current political discourses about the financial crisis, the bad guys are not the banks, otherwise the term “bank rescue” would not have established itself in the way it has in German (as *Bankenrettung*) and in other languages.

Metaphors and stereotypes construct a negative world that is criticised, and a positive world for which one campaigns. This involves the clever use of linguistic imagery to answer the question of who is friend and who is foe.

## In addition to constructing an alternative bad guy, it is important to offer, linguistically, a positive alternative reality, a utopia.

A glance at German media reports on the euro crisis brings the use of illness metaphors to light: “*Krisensymptome*” (crisis symptoms), “*Milliardenspritzen*” (injections of billions), “*griechische Malaise heilen*” (curing the Greek malaise), “*Notoperation*” (emergency surgery), “*Schuldeninjektionen*” (debt injection), “*harte Entziehungskur*” (hard detox), “*langes Siechtum*” (protracted illness), “*Kollaps*” (collapse), “am griechischen Virus anstecken” (being infected with the Greek virus), “*ob die Griechen die Medizin von außen schlucken*” (whether the Greeks will take the outsiders’ medicine), “*Ansteckungsgefahr*” (contagious). All these examples are taken from a 2012 article by Janina Schendel. Together with other dominant metaphors, such as “European politics is a fight”, a reality is being constructed that could potentially promote antipathy and perceptions of dissimilarity.

Those language patterns stand in opposition to a Europe that pro-European civil society actors imagine. Yet these very people fail to provide an alternative “bad guy” using concise language and metaphors. A bad guy in this sense could be, say, the European financial elites, who have apparently emerged from the crisis unscathed. However, one must first name this in order to turn it into something the public can experience. The illness metaphors and the questions they raise – such as “Do we have to save the Greeks?” – should not be used by civil society actors with alternative visions of the world. The use of alternative critical vocabulary could point to the fact that it is

not “the Greeks” being saved, but rather European assets, as Greece is paying the money (termed “financial assistance”) directly to its creditors (states and investors). European tax money is therefore being used to “rescue” the rich. A possible alternative perspective is unfortunately not to be found in the civil society actors’ use of language. Instead, they propagate the predominant semantics of “Greek rescue” and thus cultivate their opponents’ metaphors and stereotypes. Civil society actors could create a counterpoint by using terms such as “rescue of the rich” and formulate their perspective around this. This would shift the focus from “Germans against Greeks” to “poor against rich”.

In addition to constructing an alternative bad guy, it is important to offer, linguistically, a positive alternative reality, a utopia. Pro-European civil society actors certainly have their own positive understanding of Europe and European citizenship. Unfortunately, these Europeans have done little to linguistically distinguish themselves from the Europe constructed by those who speak of the European common market. This may be one reason why citizens see Europe as a declining economic model, within which the fear of an “infectious virus” from “the south” is running rampant. People simply lack the linguistic orientation that allows them to discover their role as Europeans. Civil society movements must change the linguistic image of the European citizen they project by using alternative metaphors such as “Europe as family”. In this way, civil society actors must first liberate themselves from the discourse-dominant linguistic categories that have been determined by politics and industry.

In addition, the metaphor of “Europe as family” elucidates that the actors’ objective should not merely be to distance themselves from the dominant usage of language, but rather to communicate with the target group using everyday language. This means that civil society actors must overcome the language barrier between expert and lay knowledge. This demands a translation that addresses questions such as: “What do Europeans look like to pro-European civil society actors?” This knowledge may be available, but it is published only in esoteric form in treaties, laws and directives – and therefore is relevant only within expert discourse. The aim here is to linguistically communicate a reality in which people can perceive themselves as being part of a European group. If one finds suitable words and linguistic images, one will find Europeans who recognise these elements within themselves.

This may be difficult for civil society actors on the European

level who finance themselves from institutional sources. Institutional funding of civil society actors reinforces the gap between expert and lay knowledge. Institutional patrons have their own ideas about civil society and demand results in their own language, which is often rooted in expert discourse. Increasing emancipation of civil society actors, above all on the European level, should be a goal. This would require financial independence in the long-term, and therefore imply financing through private donations. With this, they automatically would improve their linguistic abilities to reach people, because they would address another client. In the crisis, it is difficult to express serious fundamental criticisms when the money for civil society frequently comes from EU institutions and industry-related foundations.

In the present crisis, a common argument is that complex situations require complex depictions. This view does not consider that everyday knowledge often derives from complex, expert discourse. European politics is not more complicated than anything else that people already know. In the 19th century, it was difficult to encourage people to strike and convince them that they need to stop working to achieve better pay. It may seem illogical to demand better pay by not going to work, as this results in people not receiving pay at all. The workers' movement simplified this complexity by introducing "solidarity" as a term that provided people with orientation. This word introduced a value that enabled each person to understand that his individual well being was linked to the well being of the collective, and thus allowed members to communicate about it. The word "solidarity" makes clear how civil society actors with alternative values linguistically proposed a different way of being: by focusing on common goals not previously addressed. They proposed a better world. By adopting a critical use of language with specific vocabulary and corresponding stereotypes, the complexity of situations can be reduced, and it becomes possible for people to *understand* and identify themselves as part of a particular group.

## OVERCOMING THE BARRIER OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES

In Europe, the barrier of national languages inhibits the formulation of critical protest language, as it is difficult even for well networked actors to preserve their unique vocabulary across the respective national languages. Nonetheless, the question of, for example, how German Europeans and Greek Europeans find a common language

can be resolved. This is demonstrated by actors from politics and industry who express their interests effectively at a linguistic level even though they pursue their own interests. In contrast, civil society actors who often share interests cannot express them, because they lack the language. They should insist on coordinating the use of particular key words across Europe. This is only possible when actors have selected terms in their own language. These semantics can be spread beyond the boundaries of national languages through translation. If fitting terms are found in one language, they may not require translation. Words such as “solidarity” in the workers’ movement differ only minimally from each other in a number of languages and are understood everywhere. An example of successful protest-language networking is “The Internationale”, a song that contains almost the complete protest language of the workers’ movement in various languages. There are words that function as protest symbols today, albeit with considerably less reach. This includes the Italian word “PACE”, which is printed on a rainbow flag. This symbol has spread across Europe as an expression of pacifist left-liberal attitudes. Nevertheless, it has barely made it out of the specific protest discourse. Civil society actors should consistently use and spread existing signifying methods such as these, so that even Finnish pensioners know what they mean.

For interregional civil society actors, this means having an internet presence in English and in target-group languages. If civil society actors in Germany only have an English-language website, they will not reach the majority of their German target audience. The same applies to key phrases used by civil society actors. The slogan of Citizens For Europe (the NGO that publishes this journal) – “towards a cosmopolitan citizenship and full political participation in the European Union” – is incomprehensible to many people. Those who wish to be heard must be both audible and comprehensible.

## LANGUAGE CRITIQUE DISRUPTS THE ORDER OF DISCOURSE

Jürgen Schiewe and Martin Wengeler argue that when things are renamed, the possibility arises to explicitly criticise the opposing language by conducting language critique – that is, engaging in a *critical metadiscourse* about specific words. In the current crisis, this strategy has been used little. Language critique makes it possible to

communicate perspectives more effectively. The effectiveness of language critique results from its irritating character. Language critique is irritating because it leads to a discourse about the inadequacy of particular words. It reveals that the same object may be described in different ways. For example, a particular chemical may be described as a “plant protection product” or a “pesticide”. By giving an object a new name and addressing the difference between the different terms,

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language critique disrupts the “order of discourse” (to borrow a term from Michel Foucault). The order of discourse is based on the fact that most of us agree on the meaning of words. This silent agreement is the reason we understand each other. Language critique disrupts this certainty, and actors initially become irritated in their communication, leading to increased attention. To reorient themselves, participants must reorient their language usage, which involves incorporating the alternative terminology. They must, whether they want to or not, opt for one of the competing terms. This decision to opt for a particular use of language in turn reveals a decision to opt for a particular perspective.

Critical civil society actors could, in the spirit of linguistic critique, ask what the words “bank rescue” actually mean. They could argue that “rescue” describes a process that hardly can be questioned if one does not wish to be accused of failing to assist a person in danger, which is an offense under the law of most societies. This creates the impression that there is no other way. One could then ask what things would fundamentally be worth rescuing in this crisis.

## CONCLUSION

The opportunity a crisis presents lies in the fact that all the actors are searching for reorientation. Society is in search mode. In this crisis, members of the media have become more open to alternative knowledge. Attention does not need to be generated in an indirect

way, as is the case with scandals, which must first be “scandalised”. This underlying openness to alternative ways of thinking provides an explanation for the initial enthusiasm on the part of both the media and the public for Occupy.

Crises are more extensive than scandals. Communicative chaos reigns within them, which means that alternative perspectives may go down in the storm. That is why it is important during crises to distinguish perspectives and thus express goals in a clear linguistic fashion using critical key words and linguistic images.

Crises are understood differently from the perspective of civil society actors than by industry and politics. Civil society actors should depict crises from the perspective of citizens. The term “economic crisis”, for example, tends to lead to the question of the “bank rescue”, whereas the term “justice crisis” would lead to a question regarding the relationship between rich and poor, and also could represent more appropriately the interests of civil society.

The complexity of networking across different national languages, as well as the abstractness of the political situation, increase the demands on communication within the European and international civil society movements. Therefore, civil society actors need an encompassing protest language that better provides orientation. Clear linguistic distinguishability of perspectives allows citizens to adopt their preferred perspectives. Those who agree do not just adopt the thesis, but first the language. If one accepts that civil society actors in the current financial and economic crisis sometimes fail to appropriately communicate the complex situations that have arisen in a complex world, then critical language is the most simple and effective strategy to reduce that complexity. This forms the basis for making a discursive crisis out of a crisis, which changes attitudes and ultimately worldviews.