

Positioning in online discourses:

A contrastive analysis of German and Polish discourses about abortion

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Positioning in political online discourse

Socio-politically relevant topics are increasingly being negotiated online. In this process, users engage with a relatively large number of heterogeneous participants with different perspectives. When taking a stance, they assume different perspectives, compare them and address both their own and others' viewpoints.

How are these different perspectives encoded in the process of positioning and why?

Positioning

The expression of local, flexible, and relational aspects of one's identity, especially in terms of rights and duties that are tied to a social position.^{1,2}

Stance

The attitude towards an object.

Perspective

The relation between an observer's viewpoint and (an aspect of) the observed situation or object. It is informed by factual knowledge, subjective attitudes or goals and intentions of the speaker; it is person-bound and implies the existence of alternative perspectives.³ Perspectivisation is the encoding of perspective that can result in subjectivity, intersubjectivity, generalisation or perspective-taking.

Data and methods

Criteria for data selection⁴

- Initial tweets: with the Twitter API; keyword 'abortion' (in different wordforms) in both languages
- User comments to news articles: scraped from articles containing the keyword in online news websites with various political orientation
- Timeframe of the data: 2021

Tab. 1: Corpora

	German corpora		Polish corpora	
	Tweets	Comments	Tweets	Comments
Texts	13,713	8,796	44,492	14,492
Tokens	426,044	457,701	1,334,482	578,434

Function-oriented approach

- Analysis in MAXQDA
- Relevant tweets and comments were found via a corpus search for the most frequent verbs in the corpus (modal verbs and verbs associated with political engagement or legislative changes)
- Allows a more detailed analysis of interactive positioning and the negotiation of stance in the comment sections

Form-oriented approach

- SketchEngine
- Constructions known from previous research¹
- n-grams and recurring phrases identified during close reading (e. g. *unpopular Opinion, genau mein Humor* ['my humour exactly'])

Preliminary results

The data reveals that different perspectives are employed to frame abortion either through personal involvement or by highlighting the social relevance of the topic. Encoding a perspective can also indicate who has (or does not have) the right to speak about the topic. These strategies can be seen in both languages. Examples are given below:

(1) Subjectivity

The first-person narrative and affective stance (the reaction to a legislative change) suggest personal involvement of the writer.

*nie było mnie kilka godzin w internecie i dowiaduję się że zakazali całkowicie aborcji, **kurwa brak mi już słów***

*'I've been offline for a few hours and I've just found out that they've banned abortion completely, **fuck I'm speechless.***

(2) Intersubjectivity

Referring to social norms (deontic stance) and appealing to shared values helps to establish common ground between the writer and their readers.

*Weshalb für **uns als Gesellschaft** Ziel sein muss, Männern so viel Sorgsamkeit beim Ausleben Sexualität und Charakter beizubringen, dass Wahl eben nicht auf Abtreibung oder Alleinerziehend hinaus läuft.*

*'Which is why **our goal as a society** must be to teach men enough care in living out their sexuality and character so that choice does not lead to abortion or single parenthood.'*

(3) Generalisation

The generic pronoun *man* can indicate deontic stance, but it can also serve as a distancing device for expressing socially precarious attitudes.⁵ It generalises demands as normative expectations and it is an effort to save face by concealing the speaker.

***Man sollte** viel mehr über Abtreibung reden und informieren. **Man sollte** Schwangerschaftsabbrüche nicht mehr solange sie legal sind verurteilen.*

'We should talk and inform much more about abortion. Abortions should no longer be condemned as long as they are legal.'

(4) Perspective-taking

The reference *elgiebeciary* points to the perspective of a group and their actions. The behaviours perceived are shown as contradictory: the stances belong together, but cannot be fully joined. Pointing out perceived inconsistencies in the behaviour of others leads to a criticism of the group.

*Te wszystkie **elgiebeciary** chcą adopcji dzieci jednocześnie walczą o legalną aborcję.*

*'All these **LGBT-people** [mockingly] want to adopt children and at the same time they fight for legal abortion.'*

References

¹ Merten, Marie-Luis. 2024. *Soziale Positionen – soziale Konstruktionen: Stancetaking im Online-Kommentieren*. De Gruyter.

² Lucius-Hoene, Gabriele & Arnulf Deppermann. 2004. Narrative Identität und Positionierung. *Gesprächsforschung - Online-Zeitschrift zur verbalen Interaktion* 5(1). 166–183.

³ Zeman, Sonja. 2017. Confronting perspectives: Modeling perspectival complexity in language and cognition. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 2(1). 1–22.

⁴ Niehr, Thomas. 2002. International vergleichende Diskurs- und Argumentationsanalyse. *ELiSe: Essener Linguistische Skripte – elektronisch* 2. 51–64.

⁵ Imo, Wolfgang/Ziegler, Evelyn. 2019. Situierete Konstruktionen. Das Indefinitpronomen man im Kontext der Aushandlung von Einstellungen zu migrationsbedingter Mehrsprachigkeit. *Osnabrücker Beiträge zur Sprachtheorie* 94. 75–104.