Safe words: Frames, constructions and UK newspaper discourse on transgender people

Berit Johannsen
University of Greifswald

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The adjective *safe* and the noun *safety* are frequently used in newspaper discourse on transgender people, as in the following examples from *The Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*:

(1)   a.   […] I just think that keeping women and girls **safe** is important.
         b.   Schools should be a **safe** and and welcoming space for all pupils, regardless of how they identify […]
         c.   Increasingly, women's fears about their own **safety** and that of their children are shown to be justified.
         d.   […] that sports had to choose between **safety** and fairness on one side and trans inclusion on the other.

The construction of meaning of clauses and phrases with *safe* is complex, as has famously been illustrated by Fauconnier & Turner (2002, 25), who discuss it as an example of conceptual blending, arguing that *safe* "does not assign a property but, rather, prompts us to evoke scenarios of danger appropriate to the noun and the context". This study aims to apply conceptual blending theory and a frame semantic approach based on FrameNet to the study of discourse, focusing on discourse patterns with *safe* and *safety* in UK newspaper discourse on transgender people. It is situated in corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis, in which corpus-based techniques have already been employed in studying the discursive representation of transgender people (Baker, 2014; Zottola, 2021), and cognitively oriented discourse linguistics, in which cognitive semantic frameworks have been applied to the study of discourse (e.g. Ziem, 2014, 2016).

The data in this study consist of articles from eight UK newspapers (broadsheet and tabloid) from the year 2022 collected via NexisUni using the search terms "transgender" and "transsexual". All uses of *safe* and *safety* are annotated for their syntactic construction, collexemes, frame (Being_at_risk or Risky_situation), and frame elements. I then take other layers of discourse (Spitzmüller & Warnke, 2011) into account, in order to find discourse regularities in syntactic constructions and expressed frame elements, e.g. text (type of article) and agent (medium, author, quoted person).

One of the results of my study is that the frame elements Harmful_event or Dangerous_entity from the Being_at_risk_frame are rarely expressed in a syntactic constituent, but remain vague or have to be inferred from context. I will discuss how these properties of the lexical semantics of *safe* can be exploited in sociopolitical debates, also linking it to sociological research (e.g. Stone, 2019; Lewis et al., 2015). While being relevant to the study of transgender discourse specifically, this study thus exemplifies how cognitive linguistic models can be applied in (corpus-assisted) critical discourse analysis.

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