

Between War and Letters

An Analysis of the Public Discourse of Germany's Role in the Russia-Ukraine War

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The influence of the war against
Ukraine on discourses worldwide

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About the Special Issue: Discourses of War: The influence of the war against Ukraine on discourses worldwide

*Edited by Jens Maesse, Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak,
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The war against Ukraine has significant impacts on many societies world-wide, especially in Europe. The war changes public debates and political discourses in many countries. In addition to that, economic, technical, academic and other discourses are also influenced by this new state of things. We invite Short Papers (1200–3000 words) which reflect on these discourses.

Between War and Letters

An Analysis of the Public Discourse of Germany's Role in the Russia-Ukraine War

Julia Günther

This paper addresses the ongoing public debate in Germany regarding the political course of the German government's delivery of (heavy) weapons to Ukraine. To investigate how this debate is conducted, the Open Letter to Chancellor Scholz, published in April 2022, is analyzed to determine how polyphonic markers are used to express calls for and against certain political actions. It becomes apparent that the media discourse on the supply of (heavy) weapons is primarily conducted by two camps: those who are in favor of arms deliveries and those who are against them. Both parties attempt to move the discourse in different directions by using the genre of the Open Letter. Open letters thus prove to be an attention-generating and discourse-promoting form of protest.

Keywords: Open Letter, Arms Deliveries, Russia-Ukraine War, German Public Discourse

War in Europe – For several decades, this notion belonged to the past. But since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, what was believed to be impossible has become a bitter reality. With the war in Ukraine, Germany's foreign policy turned completely upside down: Russia's aggression initiated a "radical paradigm shift", which is particularly visible in the question of supplying (heavy) weapons to Ukraine (deutschlandfunk.de 2022)*. Or as Werkner points out: "[w]hile for decades the principle of not sending weapons to war zones was the highest principle of German arms export policy, Germany is now also supplying weapons to the Ukrainian war zone" (Werkner 2022b: 93). In addition, the national parliament decided by a large majority of 586 votes to expand arms deliveries by supplying heavy weapons (cf. BZ-Berlin 2022).

In light of these far-reaching changes in Germany's foreign policy, infratest dimap was commissioned by ARD-DeutschlandTrends to investigate the public's opinion on Ukraine policy. Divisiveness became apparent: Although the majority of the German Bundestag had already spoken out in favour of new arms deliveries, respondents were at odds on the issue of heavy weapons deliveries (cf. Ehni 2022). Thus, in the survey results published on April 28, 2022, 45 % of respondents were in favour of the delivery of heavy weapons, while just as many voted against it (cf. ebd.).

Simultaneously, the "EMMA letter" appeared. The EMMA letter is the media-disseminated short form of the *Open Letter to Chancellor Olaf Scholz* published on April 29, 2022, on the freely accessible platform EMMA-Online (cf. EMMA Frauenverlags GmbH 2022b). EMMA-Online represents the digital platform of the German feminist magazine EMMA. Its founder and editor-in-chief is Alice Schwarzer, a German journalist and well known feminist famous for her efforts in the women's movement of the 1970s and her radical feminist demands. Schwarzer initiated

* All quotes were translated into English by the author.

the EMMA letter and wrote it together with 28 intellectuals and artists. In addition to mentioning the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz as the explicit and named addressee of the Open Letter, the media audience (alias every recipient of the letter) is characterized by a second implicit address. One of the main reasons for its formulation was Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement regarding the danger of a Third World War (cf. EMMA Frauenverlags GmbH 2022a). Therefore, the letter pursues the intention to be both an appeal to Olaf Scholz to maintain his level-headedness and a warning against a potential new World War (cf. EMMA Frauenverlags GmbH 2022b).

At the time of the EMMA letters publication, the German government's handling of the war in Ukraine was perceived and examined very differently within society. The question of whether or not Germany should supply heavy weapons to Ukraine divided (and this hasn't changed up to this point) society and caused numerous debates about Germany's role in the Russia-Ukraine War, both in politics and in the (media) public. As one of the first public statements against the delivery of heavy weapons, the EMMA letter plays a central role in these social debates. The letter reflects the points of contention, concerns and fears which were in the authors' minds at the time. From a discourse-analytical perspective, it is of particular importance how the authors use different speaker perspectives in combination with polyphonic markers to articulate their criticism of the heavy weapon delivery. This is why we now take a closer look at the letter itself and examine it in discourse analysis.

“No” to Weapons for Ukraine: How Intellectuals call for Prudence

For the discourse analysis the 2nd as well as parts of the 3rd paragraphs of the letter are used. The 2nd paragraph states:

“(1) *We share* the judgment of the Russian aggression as a breach of the basic norm of international law. (2) *We also share* the conviction that there is a principal political and moral duty (3) **not** to retreat from aggressive force **without** a fight back. (4) **But** anything that can be derived from this has limits in other precepts of political ethics.” (ebd.)

The authors use this section to describe the assertions relevant in the discourse, regardless of whether these are of a legal (judgement) or moral nature (duty). Noticeably, it remains open from whom these assertions (the judgement and duty) originally stem from. The wording supplied in the text therefore delivers the impression that both assertions are *common sense*, naturally shared by all parties involved – the addressee of the letter, the potential readers, and the letter's authors. Angermüller describes such a kind of commonly shared knowledge as “so self-evident and natural [that] it does not need to reveal where it comes from”

and therefore as *preconstructed knowledge* (Angermüller 2008: 202). This knowledge significantly determines the nature of any discourse, as it “present[s] itself as a truth that demands general acceptance, indeed obedience” (ebd.). Accordingly, it is assumed that all participants in the discourse are not only informed about this preconstructed knowledge, but accept it unconditionally, too – otherwise they risk “dropping out of the community of discourse participants” (ebd.: 203). Considering that, it is all the more surprising that the authors of the EMMA letter once again explicitly indicate that they are in agreement with the pre-construct (here: condemnation of the war as illegal under international law as well as the “principal” (*booster*) duty of self-defence). By speaking of sharing (“(1) *We share* the judgment”; “(2) *We also share* the conviction”, here: both *boosters*), however, the surprise fades when one looks at the function behind the explicit assent to the preconstructed knowledge. For, by means of assent, the authors of the letter underline their legitimacy as participants in the discourse and, thus, secure their place in the discourse community. This becomes especially evident in them adding “also” (“(2) *We also share*”) at the beginning of the second sentence. This way the authors place their opinion on the same side as the addressee and imply: “We think like you on this matter”, “We are like you”. In addition, “also” functions as a reference to “(1) *We share*” of the first sentence, indicating an enumeration of several arguments by the same speaker:

per₁(l)[1]: “We share the judgement [...]”

per₂(l)[2]: “We *also* share [...]” (listing several arguments why per₁ = per₂)

It must be added that the use of the personal pronoun “we” in the first and second sentence makes the locutor visible. The locutor is responsible for what is said and thus represents the origin of the statement (cf. ebd.: 195). In this case, the locutor is identical to the letter's authors. However, the first person plural does not only refer deictically to the authors but also includes all later signers of the Open Letter. Thus standing metaphorically for a part of the German population that feels adequately represented by the opinion expressed in the letter.

In the third sentence the reader is confronted with the double negation “not [...] without” through the statement that one can “(3) not retreat from aggressive force without a fight back”. This is based, first of all, on the factual statement (or meta-assertion) that “aggressive violence” must be met with “counter-defence” (per₃(x)[3]). Besides per₃(x)[3] there is also the general possibility “to retreat from aggressive force” without “a fight back” (per₄). In contrast, there is speaker per₅, who denies per₄ through the negation “not”. The locutor rejects per₄ and shows solidarity with per₅. In view of this decision, however, it becomes obvious, that the locutor based this decision on the factual statement per₃(x)[3]:

per₃(x)[3]: “aggressive violence is retreated **with** counter-defence” (factual statement)

per₄(a)[4]: “to retreat from aggressive force **without** a fight back”

per₅(l)[5]: NO per₃, because of the negation “**not** [...] without”

Ultimately, the double negation thus leads to an affirmative statement (“not [...] without” corresponds to “with a fight back”). In contrast to an a priori positive statement, the speaker makes a weakened positive statement by using the double negative. What is striking here is that the double negation was applied to a binary term, which is linguistically mostly used in the form of “counter-defence – no counter-defence”; “with counter-defence – without counter-defence”. In the case of binary terms, the use of double negation is not common. So, although “not [...] without a fight back” intends to have the same meaning as “with a fight back”, the expressiveness of the assertion is visibly defused. This vagueness is further supported by the choice of the words “aggressive violence” and “a fight back”, because both terms seem strikingly imprecise in view of the context and the concern of the letter. For example, one can ask what form of counter-defence is meant here and what it should look like. It also remains unclear to what extent wars are not inherently accompanied by forms of aggressive violence.

The following statement (4) is based on the previously expressed statements (1–3) by means of the adverb “but”, both in polyphonic structure and content. “But” points out a contrast which, in this case, refers to the utterance: “anything that can be derived from this [referring to per_{1,2,3,5}]”. Meaning there is first a speaker (per₆) who fills the utterance “anything that can be derived from this” with implications based on the statements of per_{1,2,3,5}. For example, an implication could be “violence must always be repulsed with equal force”. In the next step, this implication is then classified as doubtful by the statement: “But anything [...] has limits” (*booster*) (per₇). In this case, the locutor shows solidarity with per₇ and rejects per₆:

per₆(a)[6]: per_{1,2,3,5} imply: Violence must always be repulsed with equal force

per₇(l)[7]: NO, because “anything [...] has limits in other precepts of political ethics”

It must also be noted that the fourth sentence sounds like a warning in relation to statements 1–3 of the EMMA letter.

The 3rd paragraph of the letter is examined according to the same scheme. It states:

“(1) The delivery of large quantities of heavy weapons, (2) **however**, could make Germany itself a party to the war. (3) And a Russian counterattack could thus then trigger the mutual assistance case under the NATO treaty (4) and **thus** the immediate danger of a world war.” (EMMA Frauenverlags GmbH 2022b)

The first section (1) addresses “the delivery of large quantities of heavy weapons”. It is interesting that “delivery” is a nominalization of “X deliver”. Due to the nominalization, the speaker remains hidden for this part of the statement,

which is why it remains unclear who initiates the delivery of weapons:

per₁(x)[1]: “The delivery [...]” as nominalization of “X deliver”

In the next section, the predicted consequence of statement (1) – the heavy weapon-delivery – is revealed by the adverb “however”, namely: Germany could thereby become a war party itself (2). Thus, the use of “however” restricts the first statement and immediately allows the locutor to emerge:

per₂(l)[2]: “however [...]” makes per₂(l)[2] as a possible consequence of per₁(x)[1]

Furthermore, an interesting form of deixis becomes visible in the statement (2). The mention of Germany can be seen as a metaphor for the personal pronoun “we”. In the case of Germany becoming a war party, the German citizens will by default, find themselves in a war. Even though all this remains vague due to the use of the conditional clause “could” (here: *hedges*). Accordingly, statement (2) is merely a conjecture, which, however, is already spun further in the third sentence – indeed in the form of a conditional clause, too. The third sentence provides the reader with discussions of a “Russian counterattack”. The counterattack is described by the “and” at the beginning of the sentence as a direct consequence of Germany’s participation in the war (per₂). The “Russian counterattack” “could thus then” in turn “trigger the mutual assistance case under the NATO treaty” (per₃). Due to the direct affiliation of the statement to the previous one, it remains with an argument supported by the same locutor. Though the locutor, in contrast to the second paragraph of the letter, keeps himself more covered with regard to the form in which he makes himself known:

per₃(l)[3]: per₂ caused by per₁ could cause per₃

Equally interesting is the fact that the mentioned NATO assistance case is not explained in detail. The authors of the letter thereby assume that all readers of the Open Letter know about Article 5 of the NATO treaty and how it works (namely NATO’s obligation to support an attacked member state). On the other hand, the deixis “thus then” clearly specifies the point in time when the case of assistance will occur. According to this, the case of assistance occurs as soon as there is a “Russian counterattack” due to Germany’s participation in the war. At this point, the assumptions turn into legal discourse, becoming an important part of the letter’s reasoning.

The last statement (4) deals with the end product of the previous reactions, in other words, the “immediate (*booster*) danger of world war”. This danger relates back to the starting event (“(1) The delivery of large quantities of heavy weapons”) and the possible follow-up reactions triggered by the starting event (Germany (2) as well as NATO (3) become part of the war). This is made clear by the usage of the adverb “thus”. It adds a specific “end goal” (potential World War) to the actual action (the delivery of

weapons). Additionally, the locutor reveals himself via the adverb:

per₄(l)[4]: per₃ (caused by per_{1&2}) could ultimately trigger per₄

By clearly naming the “danger of a world war” (4), the discourse around the supply of (heavy) weapons acquires an “affective discourse structure” (Jung 2022: 238). Meaning the use of war rhetorics such as “world war” helps to polarize and moralize discourses. It conducts the debates with mostly emotionally charged discourses (cf. ebd.: 237–238). Besides, “the more frequently the terms are articulated, the more self-evident they appear and gain interpretive power”: A “threatening atmosphere” develops (ebd.: 238).

A War of Open Letters: Public Reactions and Comments

The response to the EMMA letter was and is tremendous. In recent years, hardly any other Open Letter evoked as many different reactions and feelings among the German population as the self-titled *Letter of the 28*. Hence it did not take long until the letter was overtaken by its own resonance in the media (cf. Essig/Knopf 2022).

One of the central media reactions is a *counter-letter* published on ZEIT ONLINE at the beginning of May 2022 (cf. ZEIT ONLINE GmbH 2022). The *counter-letter* takes up the aspects mentioned in the EMMA letter and examines them argumentatively from the other side. It does this by clearly speaking in favour of arms deliveries. Interestingly, this is also an Open Letter with prominent signatories, whose designated addressee is Chancellor Olaf Scholz. At the same time, this exemplary reaction makes it clear that the discourse about the heavy weapon delivery to Ukraine, which was reignited by the EMMA letter, is not only expanded but reinforced by the media. Within the discourse, there is a binary debate about the pros and cons of arms deliveries: At what point does a state become a party of war? To what extent do arms deliveries prove to be ethically justified? And which goals are Germany and the “Global North” willing to support with its supply of weapons (cf. Werkner 2022a: 43)? Thus, the debate ultimately boils down to a moral as well as a political argument about the meaning of contested concepts such as freedom, nation, identity and culture, in which, however, “it remains unclear with which option for action one will achieve the best result” (Leiner 2016: 46).

Open Letters as a Medium of Subjective Social Criticism

Open Letters are commonly characterized by two things: an “appeal structure” and a “double addressing” (cf. Rose

2020: 553). The “double addressing” is the simultaneous presence of explicit addressees (usually clearly named in the address) and implicit addressees (cf. ebd.). Usually, implicit addressees do not occur in the intimacy of epistolary communication, except in Open Letters. In the case of the EMMA letter, the implicit addressees resulting from the public, i. e. the audience of the print and online media in which the letter was published. Through publicity, the Open Letter deliberately breaks with the privacy between sender and recipient, ensuring that the distinction between public and private is erased (cf. ebd.: 554). Accordingly, it is not a matter of handing over the letter to the explicitly addressed person separately, but rather that the receiver “learns of the letter through the media public” (ebd.: 553). However, specific publicity structures are needed for such an approach to succeed (cf. ebd.: 554). That is, the public must have “discourse power” to “function as an implicit addressee of Open Letters at all” (ebd.: 554–555). Because of this, a publicity effect may be developed that can address even “those who are absent” (Thiedeke 2020: 197). Furthermore, access to the discourse power addressed is crucial. It allows authors of Open Letters to take action and “assume an exposed spokesperson role” in the first place (Rose 2020: 555). As far as the EMMA letter is concerned, access to public discourse was already given by the popular initiator of the letter Alice Schwarzer. By publishing the letter in Schwarzer’s established magazine, the authors secured a certain amount of media attention for the piece of writing from the outset. This attention was reinforced by the prominence of the letter’s first signatories (cf. Jung 2022: 263). At the same time, it reveals the function of Open Letters: namely, making oneself heard, taking responsibility, positioning oneself publicly and, in the context of the EMMA letter, not remaining silent on the question of whether Germany should supply further (heavy) weapons to Ukraine (cf. Essig/Knopf 2022). The authors hoped their letter would lead to a broader discussion in the media on this issue, which reflects the population’s divided mood regarding arms deliveries more accurately.

The Open Letter supports this purpose in two ways: Firstly, “[it] is supposed to make the actual addressee think: Well, if everyone is reading along now, I guess I have to do something” (ebd.). In this case, social expectations play a crucial role. Secondly, “it is often also a matter of scandalization, i. e., causing a big stir” to generate resonance among the readers and addressees of the letter (ebd.). At best, the Open Letter creates “a democratic dispute between alternative programs” that allows different positions to speak out aloud and exchange arguments to generate new ideas (Jung 2022: 268). If this succeeds, however, it is also important to avoid an extreme polarization of the debate and turn it into an unresolvable “either/or rhetoric” (ebd.). In regard to the EMMA letter, it can be noted that the German debate on arms deliveries intensified – especially in the media and thus gained significantly more attention. There was a broader discussion about the topic, but at the same time increasingly emotional (in the

sense of Germany's ethical position and security). A binary division of opinions into supporters and opponents of arms deliveries solidified. The analysis of the EMMA letter makes it clear that both parties – supporters and opponents of arms deliveries – resort to multiple speaker perspectives to articulate their subjective position regarding the delivery of (heavy) weapons. This enables them to distinguish between preferred and rejected statements in the discourse. Such a procedure is particularly effective in the journalistic genre of the Open letter. For, as the EMMA letter exemplarily shows, Open letters still prove to be a particularly discourse-promoting form of protest even in times of social media (or maybe especially in these times).

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