

Dirk Nabers

Sociolinguistic competence, discourse analysis and area studies

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Introduction: Sociolinguistic competence and are studies.....	1
Meaning and discourse.....	2
Discourse and intertextuality.....	4
Sociolinguistic competence and Japanese security policy.....	7
Conclusion.....	13
Bibliography.....	14

### **Introduction: Sociolinguistic competence and are studies**

*Sociolinguistic competence* is often described as the skill to understand the social meaning of the choice of linguistic varieties and to use them appropriately in a particular communicative situation. It is directly linked to *discourse competence*, which refers to the ability to interpret the ensemble of articulatory practices in a social or cultural field. Discourse analysis could thus be described as the examination of language use by members of a speech community. It entails the study of linguistic features that characterize different genres as well as social and cultural factors of language use. (Demo 2001).

In this paper, I will argue that it is important if not indispensable for area studies specialists to conduct the analysis of discourse in its original language. Without profound scrutiny of sociocultural patterns of the target language, social scientists are apt to rely on the concepts and expectations acquired as part of their first language development, which may in many cases be inappropriate for the second language setting and may lead to distorted results. I will claim that the study of local meanings,

i.e. the meaning of words, the structures of propositions as well coherence of these propositions are essential to grasp the mental models of certain events and the more general, underlying intersubjective understandings of these events. To make my case, I will broadly rely on an approach that combines insights from the theory of hegemony by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe<sup>1</sup> and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The conceptual linkage eases the pitfalls that both concepts suffer from when studied in isolation: While political theory often ignores textual analysis, linguistics sometimes loses sight of socio-theoretical questions. I will proceed by developing a model that combines discourse and interpretation in the next two sections and sum up some findings and recommendations for empirical research in the conclusion.

## **Meaning and discourse**

Taking discourse as fundamental for the understanding of cultural differences between areas, the ontological referent of a study conducted on these premises becomes the meaning that is produced in a discourse. Any discourse analysis starts from the postulation that 'all objects and actions are meaningful, and that their meaning is conferred by particular systems of significant differences' (Howarth 2000: 101). Only after having accepted this conjecture can we go on to ask who the speakers of a discourse are, and how power relations in a discourse are constituted.

While discourse is a slippery term which draws from plentiful research traditions in social and linguistic theory, it will, in this paper, in its most general sense be seen as the structural totality of articulatory differences in a social field (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 105-114). The structure of the system is consequently also discursive; the social, and what we call the culture of the system, are constituted entirely by discourse. While Wight (2006: 278) draws a line between the 'linguistic structure of social life' and the 'social' itself, this differentiation is rejected in the following argument. Language is an irreducible constitutive part of social life (Fairclough 2003: 2), which leads to the claim that social research can be based on the analysis of language.

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Laclau and Mouffe's arguments see Nabers 2007.

Talking about discursive 'structure' does not imply a static or closed view of the international 'architecture'. On the contrary, in order to be able to think of cultural change, we have to assume a certain flexibility or openness of structures, instigated by meaningful interactions between agents. Meaning, it will be argued, does not depend on reference to the world 'out there' or on ideas about an external reality. Instead, ideas are conceptualised as an offspring of the meanings we learn and reproduce, not their source; nor are they the origin of the language we speak. We have no immediate access to their meaning without analysing the words that signify them. To be very clear about this: Ontologically, it would make no sense to argue that the entire world is discourse. As Wight points out, '[t]hat we can only know things under certain descriptions does not negate the ontological status of that to which we refer' (Wight 2006: 27). However, this study looks for a proper answer to the question of how we can know things. With Wight, it argues that we can only know the world 'under certain descriptions'. Consequently, it focuses entirely on the study of these descriptions and does not ask for a reality that exists independently of them. In accordance with Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory, we will argue that,

[in] language there are only differences without *positive terms*. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system (Saussure 1966: 120; for a discussion Smith 1998: 84-85).

Something is what it is only through its differential relations to something else. Taking meaning as differential, not referential, simply gives language priority in the analysis of 'the world': If the world, the things and concepts we seem to know, existed somewhere outside language, words would be the same from language to language, culture to culture, and no ambiguities would arise. For de Saussure, meaning exists in the sign and only there. It is linguistically constructed; people talk, write and argue the world into existence. Saussure maintains that a linguistic sign connects a concept with a sound-image – a signified with a signifier – rather than a thing and a name. Undoubtedly there is a world 'out there' that exists independently of the observers mind, but we do not have immediate access to its meaning without referring to language. Ultimately, it is through language that the objects that are meaningful for us are socially constructed. This also applies to the discursive institutionalisation of authority in a society: president, prime minister, member of parliament, or citizen

occupy different positions within a society and are unequally important as speakers of a discourse; yet, they are still identifiable as speakers in a discourse.

## **Discourse and intertextuality**

It is possible to generate broader meanings of what is said by referring to methods such as intertextual and contextual analysis. Intertextuality effaces the scientific realist critique that language-based accounts of social relations fail to take into account the possibility of second-order discourse, i.e. theory, which situates the speaking agents' stories into a wider context. In the post-structuralist tradition, we will, for example, be concerned with understanding what is present by asking what is not present in texts (Potter 1996: 70). CDA, the strand of discourse analysis that probably comes closest to both this postulate understands discourse as 'an element of social life which is closely interconnected with other elements' (Fairclough 2003: 3). Overall, CDA sees language as social practice, and a particular interest is given to the relationship between language and power (Wodak 2001: 1-2). It accepts the claim of an ultimate impossibility of fixing meanings by speech and recognizes the role of hegemony as a process of temporal fixation. Moreover, it highlights discursive differences (Wodak 2001: 11).

In that sense, it supplies the researcher with a sophisticated means for unveiling differences in power in social hierarchical structures. The notion of *context* that seems crucial for CDA is misleading in this regard, as it suggests that cultural, psychological, political, institutional and ideological factors are somehow situated outside the discursive. They are not. To make this clear, Jäger, criticising Foucault, draws a circle between discourse and 'reality', that gives the former clear priority:

I have the impression that the difficulties in the determination of the dispositive are related to a failure to determine the mediation between discourse (what is said/what has been said), non-discursive practices (activities) and manifestations (products/objects). If I [...] regard these manifestations as materializations/activities of knowledge (discourse) and non-discursive practices as the active implementation of knowledge, a context can be produced that will probably solve many of the problems (Jäger 2001: 45-46).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The dispositive, as defined by Michel Foucault, 'covers discourses, institutions, architectural institutions, regulated decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements,

When people communicate with each other, they negotiate about meanings. Through their communication, they produce and reproduce reality. Fundamental to this approach, discourse must essentially be understood as constituting the social. Jäger (1999) conceptualises discourse as the flow of text and speech through time and offers a very detailed research programme that allows for a proper empirical analysis in several steps. Fairclough, on the other hand, offers an in-depth analysis of social change. Emphasizing the social character of texts, methodologically the dimension of their external relations is of primary concern in his work, i.e. the question of how elements of other texts are 'intertextually' incorporated and interpreted, how other texts are alluded to, assumed and dialogued with (Fairclough 2003: 36, 47).

Intertextual analysis sheds light on the interrelation of texts with present and past discourses, but at the same time draws attention to how texts may transform society (Fairclough 1999: 184-185). Significant initial questions to be answered when analyzing social change refer to the texts and voices included in the texts to be analyzed and to notable absences. Furthermore, the most apparent *assumptions* of the textual body shall be identified. Assumptions comprise forms of implicitness such as presuppositions, logical implications or entailments, and implicatures (Fairclough 2003: 40). They are an important issue with respect to expressing fellowship, community and solidarity in a group of countries. All these notions depend upon meanings which are shared, and the progress of hegemonic relationships include the capacity of certain actors to shape their nature and content. In detail, three main types of assumptions will be differentiated (Fairclough 2003: 55-56): *existential assumptions*, referring to assumptions about what exists, *propositional assumptions*, designating assumptions about what is or can be or will be the case, and finally *value assumptions*, denoting what is good or desirable.

This will make it possible to identify relations of equivalence and difference in the texts to be used for the analysis. Fairclough has argued that Laclau's conceptualization of hegemony and his logics of equivalence and difference can be operationalized for critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003: 88-89, 100-103). Equivalence and difference correspond to the concepts of syntagmatic relations of

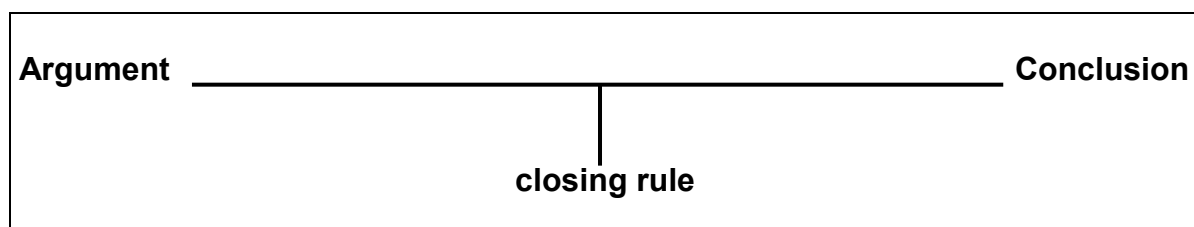
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philosophical, moral or philanthropic teachings, in brief, what is said and what is not said' (Foucault 1978: 119-120).

*combination* and paradigmatic relations of *substitution* in linguistic theories. While relations of equivalence are likely to be semantic relations of addition, elaboration, synonymy and subordination (hyponymy), relations of difference are set up as semantic relations of contrast. Critical linguists also call this mechanism 'overlexicalization', meaning that antagonists are lexicalized in various ways.

An example for this practice is the term 'evil', which is employed in the American antiterror-discourse to label the enemy, whilst its origin lies in Christian vocabulary. Concepts like these address knowledge structures of recipients in order to unveil causal relationships, spatio-temporal attributions und specific thematic correlations. Any vocalization may include attributes or refer to circumstances which are implied, but are not made explicit (Linke/Nußbaumer/Portmann 1994: 233). It is therefore possible to differentiate between a claimed statement (*conclusion*) and a presupposed statement (*argument*). Both statements are linked through a *closing rule* (fig. 1). The analysis of must be considered crucial for sociocultural analyses.

Fig. 1: Conclusion, argument and closing rule



The logical relationship between argument and conclusion is often generated by means of binary constructions. It is only by reference to an outside *Other*, that identity constructions of the *Self* become achievable. Relations of difference in a discourse resemble a rope-ladder, which makes it possible to capture broader meanings of discourses, i.e. discursive *macro structures*. Each demand in an emerging hegemonic discourse in Laclau and Mouffe's sense is organically associated with a chain of other demands; each signifier invokes a series of other signifiers (Laclau 1977: 102-103; Smith 1998: 167). According to Fairclough (2003: 41-2), there are several ways in which texts potentially deal with difference in Laclau's and Mouffe's sense, referring to

- the discovery of difference in terms of dialogue with others;
- the emphasis of difference through conflict and an open struggle over meanings, norms and power;
- the effort to resolve or surmount difference;
- a bracketing of difference by focussing on commonality, solidarity and identity, and finally
- the normalization and recognition of difference through consensus.

In concurrence with Laclau and Mouffe, Fairclough is interested in the question of how particulars in a discourse come to signify universals, especially how divergent identities come to be claimed as collective. On that basis, we will ask the following questions (see also Jackson 2005; Fairclough 1992; Jäger 2001; Potter 1996):

- What assumptions underlie the language in the text?
- How are elements of other texts “intertextually” incorporated and interpreted?
- How stable and internally consistent are the examined texts?
- How are new dominant interpretative frameworks generated?

Whilst the method can be employed for all kinds of processes in international politics, it is not limited to any particular level-of-analysis. The level of the government as well as domestic or transnational politics can be analysed within the framework. CDA must essentially be seen as an open-ended research process (Fairclough 1996). A particular empirical analysis is ‘complete’ and offers significant scientific results when the analysis of new linguistic devices reveal no new findings (Jäger 2001; Fairclough 2003). This requires detailed documentation. The empirical analysis will be conducted in the mode of a hermeneutic circle – the meaning of textual samples will only be comprehensible in the context of the whole discourse, while the discourse can only be approached from its single, intertextually connected components. The following case must therefore be understood as only a brief outline to substantiate the theoretical arguments made above.

### **Sociolinguistic competence and Japanese security policy**

After the widely perceived humiliation in the Gulf War in 1991, when Japan refrained from supporting the United States in any meaningful military way due to constitutional restraints, the government in Tokyo has tried to incrementally change Japan's defense posture and opted to engage more actively in international security affairs. As will be argued in the following, this was mainly possible on the basis of hair-splitting and in some cases even pettifoggery. At the center of the domestic debate stands one particular, though significant, aspect of Japan's security policy, i.e. the problem of collective self-defense (*shûdanteki jieiken*). Collective self-defense, as used in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, in principle allows any UN member state to assist another if the latter has fallen prey to an armed attack (Dinstein 2005: 252-256; Nabers 2006a). It can be exercised individually – for example, when Britain uses this option to help another NATO member – but it can also be applied collectively, such as by NATO as a whole.

In the Japanese case, much depends on how the interplay of international and domestic law is interpreted (for a discussion see Berger 1998; Hook/McCormack 2001; Ikenberry/Inoguchi 2004). As will be clear in the following, there are plenty of ambiguous expressions in the Japanese security discourse which makes it difficult to analyze. Among those ambiguous terms are concepts such as:

- *Nihon shûhen chiiki ni okeru jitai* (situation in areas surrounding Japan): What is meant by 'situation'? And what is the geographical scope of 'areas surrounding Japan'?
- *Kyokutô yûji* (emergency in the Far East): What is the 'Far East'? How is an emergency defined legally?
- *Jiei no tame no saishô gendo no jitsuryoku* (minimum military power for national defense): How much is enough? Does this legitimate military spending that is among the biggest in the world?

In addition to the UN Charter, the San Francisco Peace Treaty unmistakably endows Japan with the right of individual and collective self-defense, and the "Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States" (MOFA 1996) also recognizes in its preamble "that they have the inherent right of individual

or collective self-defense as affirmed in the Charter of the United Nations”, and even alludes to a regional role for both parties in Article IV of the treaty:

The Parties will consult together from time to time regarding the implementation of this Treaty, and, at the request of either Party, whenever the security of Japan or international peace and security in the Far East is threatened.

Over the decades the Japanese government has, nevertheless insisted that Japan, though endowed with the right by international law, is in no position to exercise it because of the war-renouncing Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which has two separate paragraphs (Nabers 2001):

1) Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. 2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

When the Constitution was made public in 1947, its authors emphasized the “idealistic and pioneering character” (*risôshugiteki, sakigaketeki imi*) of Article 9, and even “latent military power” (*senzaiteki gunjiryoku*) was ruled out (Hidaka 1995; Maeda 1992). On September 14, 1972, the then-director general of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau confirmed before the House of Councilors Audit Committee that the right of individual self-defense was narrowly acceptable in light of Article 9, but that it would be totally impossible for Japan to help other nations when they are attacked from outside. This has become the established official view of the government until today. The second paragraph was easier to handle, as it was gradually accepted that Japan would need some kind of forces to defend its mainland. Amid rising tensions on the Korean peninsula and the eventual outbreak of war, a “national police reserve” was already established in 1950, which was named “Self-Defense Forces” (SDF, *Jieitai*) in 1954 (Hook/McCormack 2001: 14-15; Miyazawa 1956).

This study will concentrate on the more conceptual question of Japan’s contribution to the alliance with the United States, and will argue that Japan had politically embraced the option of collective self-defense far earlier than September 11, 2001,

and that the terrorist attacks of that day have only further strengthened this concept in Japan's security posture. This was mainly possible because the Japanese public was deluded by a complex legal interpretation relying which was incomprehensible even by foreign policy experts. Although the Japanese constitution prohibits the engagement of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in combatant roles, and the Japanese government's post-Cold War renunciation of the right to collective self-defense remained untouched, Tokyo eventually provided logistic and other noncombatant support to the U.S. army in Afghanistan and Iraq, engaged in search-and-rescue activities for military personnel, carried out humanitarian relief operations, guard U.S. bases in Japan, and fire on suspicious vessels in territorial waters.

The development culminated in the publication of 'New Guidelines for Japan-US Defence Cooperation' (*Nichibei bôei kyôryoku no tame no shishin*). While a proposal to implement measures that allow mutual logistic support failed in 1988 due to domestic expectations in Japan that they would be opposed by left-wing political groups, the construction of an unstable and unpredictable Korean peninsula paved the way for a pact signed by then U.S. ambassador Walter Mondale and Japan's foreign minister Yukihiro Ikeda.<sup>3</sup> 18 months later, new guidelines for joint cooperation in regional emergencies were presented to the public.

While the old guidelines for security cooperation were restricted to general directions on how Japan and the United States would cooperate in defending Japan, the new guidelines underwrite what was perceived as a wider and deeper bilateral defense cooperation between the two countries (esp. Nabers 2000; also Mulgan 2000 and Murata 2000). The new guidelines were issued on September 24, 1997. They outline a framework for:

- cooperation between the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF) and the US army 'under normal circumstances', meaning collaboration in peacetime;
- cooperation in response to a direct armed attack against Japan. While the SDF will primarily conduct defensive operations on the territory of Japan and its surrounding waters and airspace, US forces will offer support;

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<sup>3</sup> Nabers 2001; "Far East crisis cooperation eyed", in: The Japan Times, 16 April 1996.

- cooperation ‘in situations in areas surrounding Japan that will have an important influence on Japan’s peace and security’ (*Nihon shûhen chi’iki ni okeru jitai*). Functions and fields of bilateral cooperation include humanitarian relief activities, search and rescue measures, non-combatant evacuation operations, Japan’s support for U.S. forces activities, and Japan-US operational cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

This development represents the most significant expansion of Japan’s responsibilities in the alliance since its foundation in the 1950s. While the engagement of the SDF in combatant roles remained restricted to self-defense and the Japanese government’s rejection of the right to collective self-defense remained untouched, the new guidelines nonetheless underwrite deeper and wider bilateral defense cooperation between Japan and the US (Mulgan 2000: 227-228). For the time being, Japan was able to preserve its traditional identity of self restraint in military affairs, since no legislative requirements were connected with the guidelines. Yet, Tokyo quite openly demonstrated its willingness to broaden its commitments to the US.

Although the guidelines are not a legally binding document, in May 1999 three guidelines-related bills were passed in the two houses of the Japanese Diet, one allowing SDF rear-area support (*kôhō shien*) for US military action, one amending the 1996 Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA, *Buppin ekimu sôgô teikyô kyôtei*) to permit the mutual provision of necessary goods and services in case of a military emergency ‘in the areas surrounding Japan’, and the last revising the SDF law (*Jieitaihô*) to allow the dispatch of ships and helicopters of the SDF to rescue Japanese overseas.<sup>5</sup>

In the years that followed, a consensus between the ruling LDP and its coalition partner at that time, the Liberal Party, with the opposition camp on a definition of the “areas surrounding Japan” (*nihon shûhen*) seemed far away. Especially the question whether the provision of logistical support for U.S. forces required prior Diet approval lead to heated debates. While the new guidelines of September 1997 and the

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<sup>4</sup> See the text of the guidelines and related documents in: *Japan Times*, 24 September 1997; *The Daily Yomiuri*, 24.9.1997.

<sup>5</sup> “Diet begins full debate on defense cooperation bills”, in: *The Japan Times*, 18 March 1999; “Govt to set up panel on intelligence satellite”, in: *The Daily Yomiuri*, 16.3.1999; “3 Parties in accord on defense guidelines bills”, in: *The Daily Yomiuri*, 16 April 1999.

guidelines-related bills of May 1999 have not openly breached the principle to abstain from exercising the right of collective self-defense, various steps had already been taken that would call long-held policies into question. It is a question of interpretation whether a country has to engage in combat activities to actively exercise the right of collective self-defense (for a discussion Nabers 2000, 2006a).

The open break with long-held principles came after September 11, 2001. To quote just one very significant example the Cabinet Legislative Bureau (CLB), in late January 2003, announced that pre-emptive strikes against North Korean missile bases by the Japanese military would be legal and that the refueling of American warplanes as they prepared to attack Iraqi targets would not “correspond to our country’s use of force or exercising of the right to collective defense,” as Osamu Akiyama, cabinet Legislation Bureau director general, put it (Asahi Shinbun, 31 January 2003). Keeping in mind the government’s interpretation of Article 9 of the constitution, that all sovereign nations have a right to collective self-defense, but, in Japan the exercise of that right is prohibited by the constitution, this policy turn represents a remarkable shift.

However, as norm change is difficult and slow in most cases, not all norms constituting the traditional Japanese role concept were abandoned at the same time. When it came to the war in Iraq, Tokyo again made it clear that no military role could be expected of Japan. However, soon after the initial fighting in Iraq was over, the dispatch of the troops – which would come under the special measures bill for providing support to Iraq’s reconstruction implemented in the summer of 2003 – was taken into consideration by the Koizumi government. In the political debate over the bill, the Japanese government indicated that troops would not be sent to “combat areas” (Xinhua News Agency, 27 March 2003), and the US had to wait until December for a final decision over the dispatch.

In the following years, the logics of politics took priority over legal considerations. In May and June 2003, three related laws passed both houses of the Japanese Diet:<sup>6</sup> the “Law on Responding to An Armed Attack”, the “Law on Revising the Self-Defense

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<sup>6</sup> “A crucial contingency package”, in: *The Japan Times*, 29 April 2003; for a critique “Xinhua Analyzes Japan’s Motives in Enacting ‘Emergency Legislation’” “What Is Japan’s Purpose of Enacting the ‘Emergency Legislation’?”, in: fbis-Datenbank, 16 June 2003.

Forces Law” and the “Law on Revising the Law Governing Establishment of the Security Council”. Especially the first of these laws can be seen as violating Art. 9 of the Japanese constitution. According to the Japanese government’s reading of the law, the so-called “armed attack” either refers to an attack on Japanese soil by foreign forces, or an attack on Japanese vessels and aircraft on and over the high seas that is considered by the Japanese side as an “organized and planned attack”; furthermore, the definition includes an attack on SDF troops dispatched by Japan to operate in other countries according to the “Law on Assisting Peace-Keeping Activities of the United Nations” or the “Law on Special Measures for Countering Terrorism”, or finally, an attack on a government agency stationed abroad. The law also uses the phrase “in anticipation of an armed attack”, which leaves open the option of pre-empting a threat by a third country. Most significantly though, the legislation specifies that after determining that the above incidents have occurred, the prime minister may order the SDF to use force. While the Japanese government had in the past never dared to declare the possibility of the SDF using force, this is now an option. Moreover, the geographical area the laws refer to are kept open.

Inside Japan, especially the JCP and the SDP argued that the legislation could result in Japan becoming embroiled in military operations led by the United States. For Defense Agency and SDF officials, the enactment of the war contingency legislation appears to have come too late, though. “I understand that this is just the beginning,” Defense Agency chief Shigeru Ishiba said. He maintained there are still many tasks that remain to be completed, including enactment of the law to protect civilians' lives and property and measures to facilitate U.S. forces' operations in Japan to repulse armed attacks.<sup>7</sup> For the domestic and international public however, it has become difficult to grasp the meaning of the high number of security-related laws that have been issued since the middle of the 1990s. While it is debatable if Japan has not already violated its Constitution with the establishment of the SDF in the 1950s, it might have done so in the last ten years.

## Conclusion

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<sup>7</sup> “Diet enacts legislation for war contingencies”, in: *The Japan Times*, 7 June 2003.

As I have tried to show in this paper, without profound analysis of sociocultural patterns of the studied language, social scientists are apt to rely on the concepts and expectations acquired as part of their first language development, which may in many cases be inappropriate for the second language setting and may lead to distorted results. A case in point is the development of the Japanese security discourse since the beginning of the 1990s. Many concepts used in the discourse are ambiguous and can only be understood if studied in Japanese. Ambiguity of the target language leads to dissimilar translations and, hence, to distorted analytical results.

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