DEBATING DISCRIMINATION: *TRANSPHOBIC* AND *TRANSFEINDLICH* IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN NEWS AND TWITTER DISCOURSE

BERIT JOHANNSEN
FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

ABSTRACT

The words *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* can be considered socio-political keywords in current English and German speaking public discourse around issues of gender and sexuality. They have recently increased in usage frequency and their semantics and pragmatics are actively contested. In the first part of this study, I describe changes in usage frequency of these words in news discourse. In the second part, I investigate strategies used in semantic and discursive struggles around these words in semi-public discourse on Twitter, based on frequent lexicogrammatical patterns. The results show that the keywords are often used in negative evaluative context, in acts of exemplification and in different forms of denial. Furthermore, some of the lexicogrammatical patterns are often used metapragmatically and in acts of double-voicing as a means of positioning.

CONTACT

Berit Johannsen, Freie Universität Berlin, Institute for English Language and Literature, Habelschwerdter Allee 45, 14195 Berlin. berit.johannsen@fu-berlin.de

ORCID

0009-0007-4076-336X

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Berit Johannsen

Freie Universität Berlin

1.   Introduction

On 2023-07-10, Julian Reichelt, the former editor-in-chief of the German tabloid BILD and now involved in the right-wing online news portal NIUS, posted a tweet[1] with a video that shows him talking during what looks like an editorial conference. He talks about the previously crowned Miss Nederland, who is a trans woman, his refusal to accept her gender identity and puts forward the conspiracy theory that others want to control his and other people's thoughts and force them to say things that they do not believe. At the end of the video, he says the following:

(1) Demnächst sagen diese Leute: Bitte behauptet, wenn ihr ein Glas in der Hand habt und es loslässt, es fällt nicht runter. Und wenn du was anderes sagst, bist du schwerkraftphob und damit eindeutig rechts.

('Soon these people will say: Please claim that if you hold a glass in your hand and let it go, it will not fall down. And if you say something else, you are gravity-phobic and therefore clearly right-wing.')

He coins the word *schwerkraftphob* 'gravity-phobic', mocking the use of *transphob* 'transphobic' and other words in *-phob* (e.g. *homophob*) and the practice of pointing out discriminatory actions, beliefs or structures. The analogy drawn here is inconsistent: being labeled gravityphobic if you say that gravity exists would correspond to being labeled transphobic because you say that trans people exist. But even though the logic does not work with the word that is formed here, this utterance plays on the assumption that terms in *-phob* are used in order to malign people who supposedly tell the truth and allegedly utter scientific facts. It also links words in *-phob* and the practice of labeling actions as discriminatory to political positions of the left.

This example illustrates several things: trans people are a central topic in right-wing discourse, which ranges from the refusal of trans rights to the denial that trans people exist. This is part of a larger transnational anti-gender movement and discourse, which is united by an opposition to what is labeled as 'gender ideology' (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). Borba (2022) argues that the term 'gender ideology' is used 'as a trope to anathem-

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ize feminist and LGBTQIA+ agendas and to uphold an essentialist (rather than social and political) view of sexual orders, [lumping] together various values such as the reaffirmation of cisheteropatriarchal conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality while simultaneously shielding its users from being accused of bigotry' (p. 59). Similarly, Zottola and Borba (2022) claim that 'anti-gender rhetoric is an umbrella narrative that lumps together a cohort of inchoate but ideologically interlinked conspiracy theories in a seemingly coherent but highly heterogeneous narrative whole' (p. 467). In their analysis of news articles from Brazilian and US far-right media outlets that refer to 'gender ideology' they find out that *transgender* is another collocate of *ideology*, which confirms the focus on transgender identity in anti-gender discourse. Additionally, the phrase *transgender ideology* is linked to *child abuse* and verbal patterns with *critiquing* and *questioning validity* (Zottola & Borba, 2022, p. 476).

The example with *schwerkraftphob* in (1) also illustrates how anti-gender discourse mobilizes 'scientific tropes to counter the validity of gender as a scientific concept and transmogrify it into an ideology that distorts reality' (Zottola & Borba, 2022, p. 476). It also displays another discursive pattern identified by Zottola and Borba (2022, p. 476), namely the association of 'gender ideology' with the political left. Furthermore, the example shows that the practice of pointing out discrimination and the terms that are used for describing discrimination (-*isms* and -*phobias*) are linked to feminist, queer and left-wing activists in anti-gender discourse. Anti-discriminatory practice and terms describing -*isms* and -*phobias* are defamed, and anti-gender actors portray themselves as victims of this practice. Mayer and Sauer (2017) illustrate how conservative and right-wing actors in Austria apply this strategy, in which 'discriminations addressed by these measures are belittled or declared non-existent' and anti-discriminatory measures are 'painted as all-encompassing, powerful devices that interfere directly with everyone's life, limiting their freedom of choice, democratic rights, freedom of speech and thought' (p. 32). They argue that the purpose of this strategy is to paint 'a very dark picture of "gender ideology", while simultaneously displaying the courage of the critic who still dares to talk' (Mayer & Sauer, 2017, p. 32).

Words that describe discrimination can thus be considered socio-political keywords in this discursive arena, which Jeffries and Walker (2012, p. 211) define as 'cultural keywords which have socio-political significance in a particular period', in the tradition of Williams' (1976) cultural keywords. They can also be considered discourse keywords, which is the term used by Schröter, Veniard, Taylor and Blätte (2019) for words that are frequent in a certain discourse, function as semantic nodes in that discourse, 'are usually part of an ensemble of other lexical items' and 'signify controversially debated issues' (Schröter *et al.*, 2019, p. 15). Both socio-political and discourse keywords must be distinguished from statistical keywords, which are words that appear in a text or corpus significantly more frequently than expected by chance when compared to a reference corpus (Baker, Hardie & McEnery, 2006, p. 97).

In this study, I investigate one of these socio-political keywords in two different languages: *transphobic* in English and *transfeindlich* 'trans-hostile' in German. After briefly assessing their status as socio-political keywords, I will focus on two attributes of socio-political keywords. First, I want to find out whether there has been a change in usage frequency of the words in public news discourse. Here, I will also take alternative lexemes, *trans-hostile* in English and *transphob* 'transphobic' in German, into account. Second, I aim to identify recurring discourse patterns surrounding these words on the social media platform Twitter (now X) and link them to discursive strategies of negotiating the meaning of socio-political keywords.

2. Background

2.1. Transphobic *and* transfeindlich *as socio-political keywords*

In a discussion of what makes a word a candidate to be a keyword in Williams' (1976) sense, Durant (2008) lists five attributes that are regularly invoked for keyword status. First, keywords 'are commonly used to express and negotiate meanings in day-to-day discourse, while often also implying a claim to authority derived from one or more discipline-specific uses' (Durant, 2008, p. 135). Second, they are polysemous, i.e. 'words that are construed differently on different occasions of use' (Durant, 2008, p. 135). Third, they 'designate social or cultural concepts and practices', 'they lexicalise, and so give recognised identity to, social practices, beliefs, value systems, and preferences', and therefore they are usually 'relatively abstract names for general practices, theories or standards of judgment' (Durant, 2008, p. 135). Fourth, they are actively contested and 'play a role in some kind of social debate or dispute' (Durant, 2008, p. 135). Fifth, they 'function either as part of a group of interrelated words which together are the terminology of debate for a particular topic, or as the principal word in a semantic field surrounded by cognates' (Durant, 2008, p. 136). These attributes should not be regarded as a checklist. Durant points out that these criteria 'are not necessary and sufficient conditions for 'keyword' status' but rather 'ways of focusing discussion, by characterising features of a "keyword" prototype"' (Durant, 2008, p. 137). The five attributes proposed by Durant (2008) can all be observed in the use of *transphobic* and *transfeindlich*.

In its earliest uses in the 1990s the English adjective *transphobic* was used within trans communities – the first recorded usage in the Oxford English Dictionary is from 1993, appearing in the newsletter *Rites of Passage* in the text *On Hatefulness in Pronoun Usage* by the editor Dallas Denny, where she concludes that '[t]he deliberate misuse of pronouns is more than an insult; it is the basest, lowest thing that an individual can do to a transsexual person. It is analogous to calling an African-American a nigger. It is hitting below the belt. It is reprehensible. It is transphobic.' (Denny, 1993). In later (trans)feminist and/or academic discourse, definitions of the related nouns have been proposed. For example, Serano (2016) defines transphobia as 'an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against people whose gendered identities, appearances, or behaviors deviate from

societal norms' (p. 12), or Ewert (2021, p. 17) defines *Transfeindlichkeit* as the complex forms of exclusion of trans people, violence against them but also their categorization as a defect or deviation. In these two definitions, there are minor differences regarding the scope and nature of transphobia. Bettcher (2014) also argues that '[w]hile it is clear transphobia exists, however, it is far from evident what transphobia is' (p. 249). After providing a provisional definition of transphobia as 'any negative attitudes (hate, contempt, disapproval) directed toward trans people because of their being trans' (2014, p. 249), Bettcher discusses how the scope of the definition depends on the definition of *trans people* and why she prefers 'to leave *trans people* undefined and open to the multiple, contested meanings' (2014, p. 250). She also discusses that the first part of the definition, which she defines broadly as negative attitudes, must go beyond the literal meaning of *phobia* as 'fear' and that the implication of irrationality, which is also part of Serano's definition, must be rejected.

Apart from this activist and academic discourse, the words have become more commonly used in day-to-day discourse in the past few years. In a study commissioned by the non-profit organization *Mermaids* and published on their website Baker (2019) compares the coverage of stories about trans people in the British press in 2012 and 2018-2019. He finds a clear increase in references to transphobia (using the words *transphobia, transphobic* or *transphobe(s)*), which are 112 times more frequent in 2018-2019 compared to 2012. While Baker's analysis focuses on the representation of trans people, I will assess the usage frequency of *transphobic* and *transfeindlich*, as well as the German synonym *transphob* 'transphobic', in news discourse in Section 3. The words *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* are polysemous, in that they are defined in different ways in different contexts – though I consider the attribute of polysemy too unspecific to distinguish keywords from any other words, since any word is more or less polysemous. They also very clearly designate aspects of social practices, beliefs and value systems. Furthermore, as discussed in the introduction, *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* are part of the terminology of debate for a particular topic, namely issues of gender and sexuality.

Finally, the words are also actively contested. Baker (2019) analyzed a random sample of 100 references to transphobia and related terms like *transphobe* and found that almost half of them (47%) 'raised questions about the validity of the concept or whether something actually really was transphobic' (Baker, 2019). Several distancing techniques, which indicate suspicion of the terms *transphobia, transphobic* and *transphobes*, were used in the articles, such as placing them in distancing scare quotes, which occurred in 15% of all uses of the words, but also using phrases such as *supposed transphobia* or *alleged transphobia* or reporting that a claim about transphobia was incorrect (Baker, 2019). Furthermore, news tend to focus on accusations of transphobia rather than the transphobic actions: 'When the press write about transphobia it tends to be framed as "it is newsworthy that x calls y transphobic" as opposed to "transphobia is a problem that needs to be tackled"' (Baker, 2019).

This attribute – the active contestation of meaning – will be the focus of the second, larger study, presented in Section 4 of this paper. The following subsection introduces concepts from the literature on the contestation of meaning of keywords, which will be applied in the analysis in Section 4.

2.2.   Semantic struggles

The phenomenon of concern is referred to by various terms in the literature on keywords, all of which use fight metaphors: 'semantic conflict' (Schröter, 2008, p. 51), 'semantic struggle' (Kranert, 2020, p. 34), which is based on Girnth's (2015) 'Kampf um Wörter' ('fight about words') and 'semantische Kämpfe' ('semantic fights/struggles').

Schröter (2008) regards the reference 'to issues that are controversially debated in the public arena' as the 'most crucial characteristic of key words' (p. 51). She argues that this 'does not only add to the complexity of the internal semantic structure; it also triggers metalinguistic comments that are concomitant with the use of these key words' (Schröter, 2008, p. 51). Such metalinguistic comments 'show that there is a public awareness of the role of certain expressions in the related discourse' and are therefore 'indicators for the existence and for the public awareness of semantic conflict' (Schröter, 2008, p. 51). Schröter (2008, pp. 51–52) also lists common forms of metalinguistic comments in public discourse: 1. Distance markers like inverted commas or *so-called*, 2. Attribution, e.g. *echte/wirkliche/faktische/Schein-/Integration* ('genuine/real/actual/fake integration'), 3. Explications of meaning, and 4. Suggestions concerning the adequacy of reference.

Girnth (2015, pp. 73–80) focuses on political discourse and discusses linguistic strategies that political actors use in order to seize semantic power ('semantische Herrschaft') over a keyword ('Symbolwort'). These linguistic actions are essentially metalinguistic actions (Girnth, 2015, p. 73). The first strategy is contextualization, which is the use of the word in specific contexts to influence its meaning. Girnth (2015, p. 77) further distinguishes three types of contextualization: denotative contextualization influences the denotation of the word, evaluative contextualization influences the connotation of a word, e.g. positive or negative evaluation, and deontic contextualization is related to what the word asks the hearer to do. Another strategy consists in acts of exemplification, which establish a direct relation between an extralinguistic object of reference and the keyword, typically in the form of *Das ist x* ('this/that is x') (Girnth, 2015, p. 78). Furthermore, the use of definitions as an explicit fixation of meaning contribute to the denotation of a word by explicitly relating semantic features, which are either new or already conventionalized, to a word (Girnth, 2015, p. 79). The two final strategies that Girnth (2015, p. 79) mentions are reference to the ingroup and the use of metaphors.

2.3.   Talk about -isms

Outside of the research tradition dealing with socio-political keywords, other fields of study have inspected how people talk about and respond to various forms of discrimination.

A range of conversation analytic studies have considered how participants in interaction orient and respond to prejudicial talk (Robles, 2015; Romaniuk, 2015; Speer, 2015; Stokoe, 2015; Whitehead, 2015; Whitehead & Stokoe, 2015). Many of them have observed that 'producers and recipients of -isms rarely orient toward them, or characterize them explicitly as such' (Speer, 2015, p. 465), i.e. speakers rarely directly challenge prejudicial talk by labeling them as *racist*, *sexist* etc. Furthermore, Robles describes two difficulties in identifying prejudices, e.g. racism, both for participants and analysts: '(1) explicitly racist stances are rarely espoused, indeed, potentially racist discourse is often delicately introduced and (2) "calling out" or otherwise obviously disaligning may be dispreferred, sanctionable, or face threatening' (Robles, 2015, p. 391). In sum, 'successfully challenging an -ism in real-life interaction is not straightforward' (Speer, 2015, p. 469)

For the analysis in this paper, discursive strategies of denial, which have been observed in text and talk about ethnic or racial affairs (van Dijk, 1992), expressed in patterns such as *I am no racist, but...* (Geyer, Bick, & Kleene, 2022), will also be relevant. Van Dijk observes that 'in text and talk about ethnic or racial minorities, many white people follow a double strategy of positive self-presentation, on the one hand, and a strategy of expressing subtle, indirect or sometimes more blatant forms of negative other-presentation, on the other hand' (1992, p. 89). This happens in everyday informal conversation, but especially often in public discourse. Denial of racism is part of the strategy of positive self- and ingroup presentation (van Dijk, 1992, p. 89). This strategy has an individual and a social dimension, as it can be concerned with positive self- or ingroup presentation: 'Not only do most white speakers individually resent being perceived as racists, also, and even more importantly, such strategies may at the same time aim at defending the ingroup as a whole: 'We are not racists', 'We are not a racist society'' (van Dijk, 1992, p. 89). The individual form is characteristic of informal everyday conversation, the social form is typical for public discourse. Denials can occur in various interactional settings. They can be 'part of a strategy of *defence*, presupposing explicit or implicit accusations', but they 'may also be pre-emptive […], that is, they may focus on *possible* inferences of the interlocutor' (van Dijk, 1992, p. 91). When there are explicit accusations of racism, 'denials of racism often turn into counter-accusations of intolerant and intolerable anti-racism' (van Dijk, 1992, p. 90). This phenomenon of denial can potentially also be observed in the context of other forms of discrimination, for example transphobia.

Corpus linguistic studies of transgender discourses have mostly focused on the linguistic representation of trans people in the press, revealing a largely negative representation via an analysis of frequency and collocates of different terms referring to trans people (Baker, 2014; Zottola, 2018; Zottola, 2021) and showing how transphobia is produced and reproduces through repetition of misgendering in direct quotes (Gupta, 2019). While these studies have addressed main stream media representation, Webster has conducted several corpus-assisted critical discourse analyses of the self-identification of trans people on Twitter (2018; 2022) and in an internet forum (2019).

How people react to and challenge transphobia has only been addressed in a small number of studies so far. Zimman (2017) discusses how transphobia and cissexism manifest in language, gives an overview of the resulting challenges for trans-affirming language and presents strategies developed by trans speakers and promoted by trans activists concerned with language reform. Heritage (2022) studies how transphobic ideologies are expressed in reactions to the inclusion of a transgender character in a computer game and how such ideologies are challenged. Among other things, Heritage finds that throughout 'the comments that disagree with transphobic statements, posters explicitly name the ideologies transphobic' (Heritage, 2022, p. 43). This stands in contradiction to the results of conversation analytic studies on reactions to prejudicial talk, where it was rarely directly labeled as such. This suggests that there might be different interactional behaviors online compared to face-to-face conversations.

3.   Usage frequency of *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* in news discourse

3.1.   *Aim, data and methodology*

In the first part of this study, the focus lies on the usage frequency of the keywords in public discourse. In order to assess how frequently *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* are used in public discourse and whether the frequency of usage has changed over time, I searched for the words in news corpora. For English, I used the Corpus of News on the Web (NOW) (Davies, 2016), which contains data from web-based newspapers and magazines starting from 2010 and is updated daily. To find information about the time before 2010, I searched for *transphobic* in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Davies, 2008), which contains data from the genres spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts[2] from the years 1990–2019. For German, I searched for all word forms of the lexeme *transfeindlich* in the Mannheim German Reference Corpus (DeReKo) (Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache, 2023), which includes newspapers and magazines from after the Second World War until 2022 in the release that I used.[3]

In addition, I searched for synonyms of the words in the corpora. In English, *transhostile* may be used as an alternative to *transphobic*, while German also offers *transphob* 'transphobic' as a synonym to *transfeindlich*.

To identify meaningful periods in the frequency development of the words, I applied variability-based neighbor clustering (Gries & Hilpert, 2008; Gries & Hilpert, 2012), a method that allows to partition diachronic corpus data into periods in a bottom-up way using a clustering algorithm that groups together data from temporally adjacent corpus periods that are most similar to each other. To conduct the analysis. I used the R script

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2   I excluded the recently added genres TV/Movies subtitles, blogs, and web pages.

3   I used the 2023-I release, Archive W of written corpora, corpus 'W-ohneWikipedia-öffentlich'.

provided on the companion website[4] to Gries and Hilpert (2012), which uses the standard deviation as a similarity measure and averaging as amalgamation rule.

3.2. Results

Figure 1 shows the frequency per million words of *transphobic* in the NOW Corpus per year until 2023. We can observe a general rise in the frequency of use, which becomes more pronounced in 2021, where the frequency almost doubles compared to the year before. Applying variability-based neighbor clustering, I identified six meaningful clusters in the data: 2010–2014, 2015, 2016–2018, 2019–2020, 2021–2022, 2023 (s. dendogram in Figure 11 in the appendix). This shows, among other things, that the year 2023 stands out compared to the other years. In the 2010s, there is a clear peak in the year 2015. This peak could be related to what has been called the 'Transgender Tipping Point' in US culture, based on the title of a cover story featuring transgender actress Laverne Cox in *Time* magazine in May 2014 (Steinmetz, 2014), in which the author describes a growing visibility of trans people and the gained momentum in the social movement around trans rights. Richardson and Smith (2022, p. 1) observe that this 'idea was celebrated in much of the Western media with many journalists pointing out that trans people were "everywhere" in popular culture and, the following year, Vogue even declared 2015 to be the 'Year of Trans Visibility'". A closer look at the usage contexts in the corpus would be needed in order to find out whether the high 2015 numbers can be related to this idea of a Transgender Tipping Point, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. These results also correspond to Baker's (2019) observation that references to transphobia are 112 times more frequent in stories about trans people in the British press from 2018–2019 compared to 2012, as the usage frequency of *transphobic* in the NOW corpus is more than three times as frequent in 2019 compared to 2012.

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4   https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/fdscontent/uscompanion/us/static/
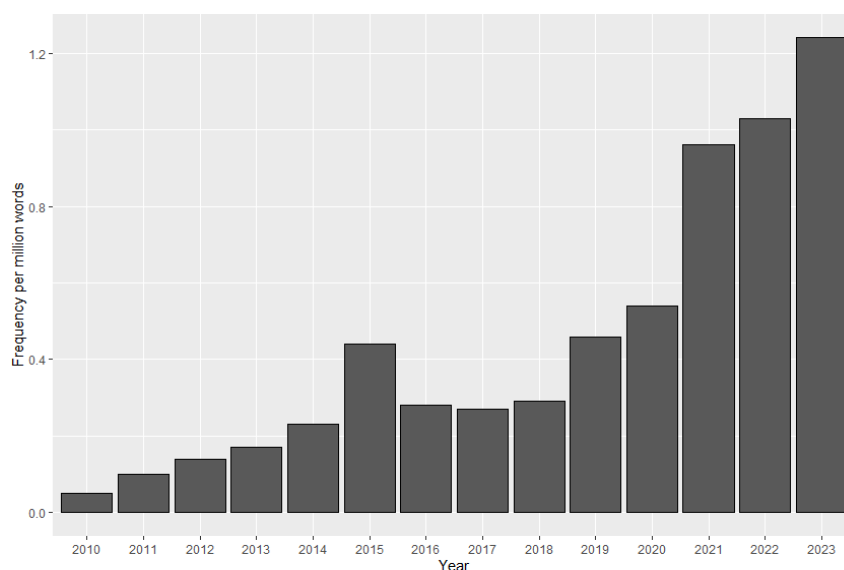   companion.websites/nevalainen/Gries-Hilpert_web_final/vnc.individual.html

Figure 1*: Frequency of* transphobic *in NOW Corpus*

In the COCA, which also includes data from before 2010, the first use of *transphobic* appears in 2014. It has to be kept in mind that the COCA is smaller than the NOW cor-pus, but the fact that *transphobic* does not appear at all before the 2010s in the COCA in-dicates that the word was rarely used in public discourse before the 2010s.

The synonym *trans-hostile* is very rarely used in the NOW corpus. The first instance appears in 2019, which is the only usage in that year, compared to 911 uses of *transphobic*. In the following years, the usage frequency remains very low. In the COCA, *trans-hostile* does not occur at all.

Figure 2 shows the frequency per million words of the lexemes *transphob* and *trans-feindlich* in the DeReKo per year until 2022. *Transphob* appears first in 2007, and thus earlier than *transfeindlich*, which appears first in 2012 in the corpus and does not reappear until 2016, after which it becomes used more frequently and extremely rises in frequency in the years 2020, 2021, and 2022. *Transphob* similarly rises in usage after 2016, remaining the more frequently used variant until 2021. In 2022, *transfeindlich* has become the more frequent variant, more than doubling in frequency compared to the year before, while the frequency of *transphob* has remained at a similar level.
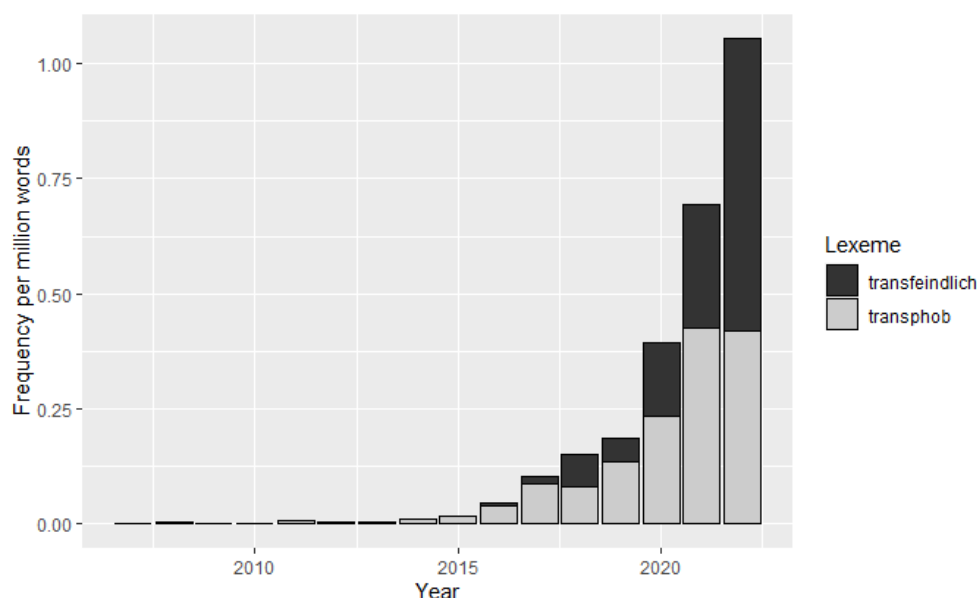
Figure 2*: Frequency of the lexemes* transfeindlich *and* transphob *in DeReKo-2023-I, Corpus: W-ohneWikipedia-öffentlich*

In sum, the corpus analysis indicates that the lexemes *transphobic* in English and *transphob* and *transfeindlich* in German started to appear in news discourse around the year 2010, slowly began to rise in frequency from 2015 on and became decidedly more frequent from 2021 on. In contrast to the English data, the German data do not have a small peak in 2015, which could be explained by the 'Transgender Tipping Point' mostly restricted to US culture. While in the English news discourse the word *transphobic* is almost exclusively used, with the alternative *trans-hostile* basically non-existing, there is competition between *transfeindlich* and *transphob* in German news discourse, in which *transfeindlich* has become the most frequently used variant in 2022. Both *transfeindlich* and *transphob* can thus be considered socio-political keywords in German discourse based on their frequency.

4.   Strategies of negotiating the meaning of *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* on Twitter

4.1.   Aim, data and methodology

The aim of second part of this study is to explore the semantic struggle around the keywords *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* on the social media platform Twitter (now X).[5]

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5   The data for this study were collected from Twitter shortly after it was acquired by Elon Musk in October 2022, but before it was rebranded to X in July 2023. Therefore, and because the affordances and the user group of Twitter have changed drastically since, I continue referring to the platform as Twitter and talk about it in past tense.

Specifically, I want to find out which of the discursive strategies of negotiating meaning introduced in Section 2.2 are applied and how they are applied by Twitter users. To this end, I identify recurring discourse patterns based on frequently used lexicogrammatical patterns and analyze whether these frequent discourse patterns correspond to any of the strategies of negotiating the meaning of keywords.

Twitter was chosen as the site of research as it used to have several affordances that made it an important semi-public space in the 2010s and early 2020s for within- and across-community discourse about socio-political issues generally and trans issues specifically (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2020; Zottola, 2024). The platform was characterized by several features. It had an 'asymmetrical network structure' (Squires, 2016, p. 247), which means that relationships between users were not necessarily reciprocal. This asymmetrical network formed a discursive space that was shared by a variety of social actors, from private users over celebrities, journalists, politicians to 'non-human entities such as brands, corporations, products, and other types of organizations' (Squires, 2016, p. 247). The default setting and normative expectation was that tweets are publicly available. The central function of Twitter was information sharing (Squires, 2016, p. 247), but the 'searchable talk' that was created via hashtags on the site also functioned in creating affiliation and building communities (Zappavigna, 2011).

These affordances made Twitter a relevant platform for queer and trans activism in the 2010s, as it allowed building networked counterpublics, as for example in the #GirlsLikeUs network of trans women of colour (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2018), and made connections between local offline and transnational online activism possible (Kilic, 2023). At the same time, trans-exclusionary movements organized and expanded via Twitter (Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020, p. 679) and trans-exclusionary alliances between gender-critical feminists and right-wing populists formed on the platform (Zahn & Lünenborg, 2024), as the 'affordances of Twitter enable an affective alliance between groups of actors who were previously and beyond this topic ideologically in opposition' (Zahn & Lünenborg, 2024, p. 17). Twitter thus formed a site of debate around socio-political issues and related semantic struggles.

The data for this study were scraped from Twitter using the Python tool TWINT (TWINT Project, 2017/2023). The English dataset was compiled in November 2022 and consists of all available tweets containing the string 'transphobic' from March and September of the years 2012–2022, as scraping the complete data was technically not possible. The dataset consists of 921,846 tweets in total. Figure 3 shows the distribution of tweets per year. The analysis presented in this study was conducted on a subset of the tweets from March and September 2022, which amounts to 202,564 tweets, as the complete dataset provided too big for detailed analysis.
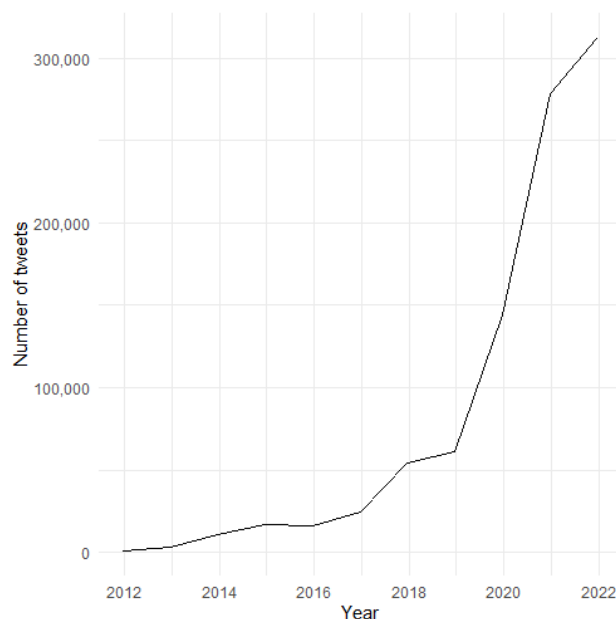
***Figure 3**: Number of tweets containing transphobic per year (March and September)*

The German dataset was compiled on 2022-07-06 and consists of all available tweets containing a word form of *transfeindlich*[6] at that time, which amounts to a total of 40,277 tweets. Figure 4 shows the distribution of tweets per year. The dataset is restricted to the lexeme *transfeindlich*, excluding *transphob*, for two reasons. First, *transfeindlich* instead of *transphob* is often described as the preferred form, for example by trans people and activists, as the morpheme *–phob* focuses on 'fear', which is not the central source of discrimination. For example, Ewert argues that discriminating attitudes do not exist out of fear, but out of hate or due to existing norms (2021, pp. 16–17). This also applies to other terms referring to other forms of discrimination, e.g. *homofeindlich* and *homophob*. This preference for words in *-feindlich* can be seen as an explanation for the shift in usage observed in Section 3. The second reason is of technical nature. The search via TWINT does not allow to restrict tweets to a specific language, the search for *transphob* and its word forms lead to many results from languages other than German, mainly tweets in English with the noun *transphobe(s)* but also, for example, tweets in French with the adjective *transphobe(s)*, which cannot be easily filtered out. A search for *transfeindlich* and its forms on the other hand only returns tweets in German.

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6   The strings searched for are *transfeindlich, transfeindliche, transfeindlichem, transfeindlichen, transfeindlicher* and *transfeindliches.*

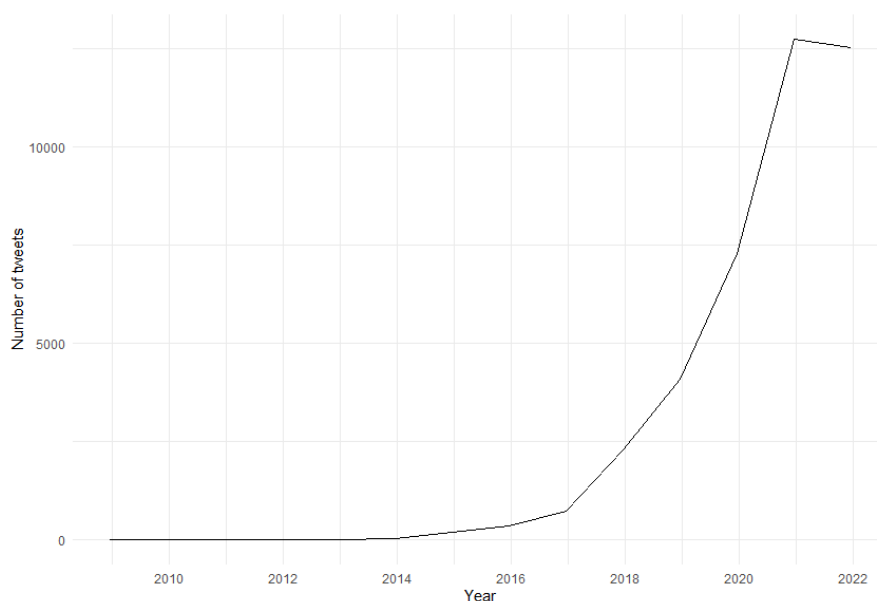***Figure 4****: Number of tweets containing a form of* transfeindlich *per year*

For the analysis, I conducted n-gram analyses of both datasets using tidyverse pack-ages (Wickham *et al.*, 2019) in R (R Core Team, 2022). N-gram analysis was preferred over collocation analysis because I wanted to reveal frequent lexicogrammatical patterns, which may include high frequency words — similar to the lexical bundles described by Biber (2009) and Biber, Johannson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan (2021) —, and not solely combinations of words that appear together more often than would be expected by chance. For each dataset, I identified all the bigrams, trigrams, and fourgrams and con-sidered the 20 most frequent in each category for closer analysis. I did not exclude stop-words from the n-gram analyses since I was specifically interested in lexicogrammatical patterns. In my analysis, I linked frequently used lexicogrammatical patterns to different strategies of negotiating the meaning of *transphobic* and *transfeindlich*. For detailed ana-lyses of select patterns I then created subsets of tweets with specific patterns that emerge from the n-gram analysis.

4.2.   *Results: Patterns and strategies*

Figures 5–10 show the 20 most frequent bigrams, trigrams and fourgrams in the English and the German datasets. In the following, I will categorize patterns that emerge from the n-gram analysis regarding the discursive strategies that are applied. It must be em-phasized that when I talk about strategies, I do not assume that they are always con-sciously and intentionally applied, and not necessarily with the aim of influencing the meaning of these keywords. I will focus on the patterns that include *transphobic* or *trans-feindlich*. In general, it is noticeable that a majority of the most frequent n-grams include *transphobic* or *transfeindlich* respectively. This can partially be explained by the corpus

composition, but also underlines that *transphobic* or *transfeindlich* tend to be keywords when they occur in a tweet.
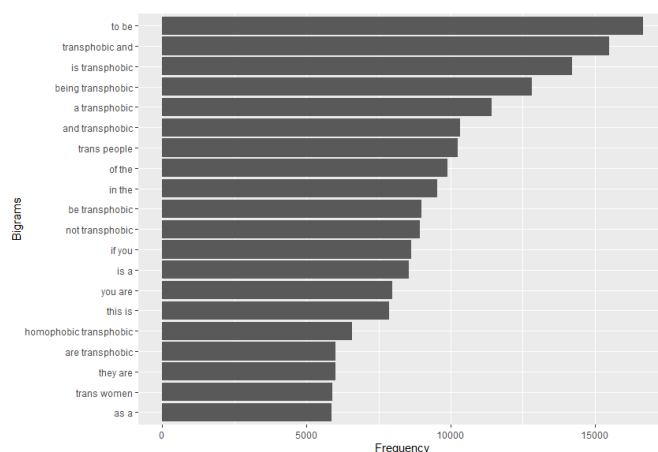

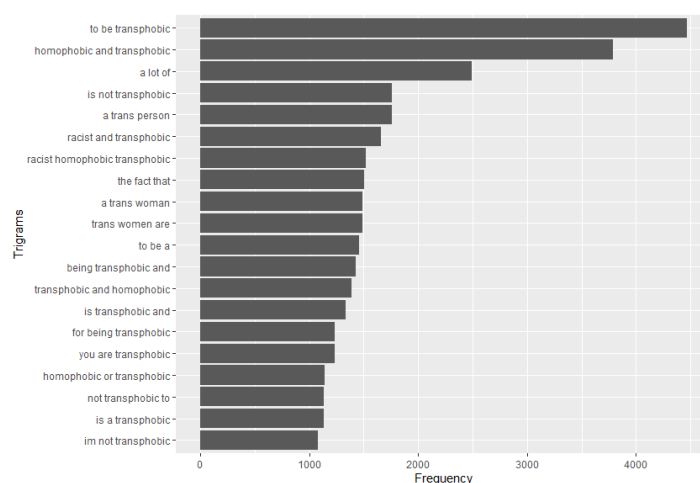***Figure 5**: Top 20 bigrams in English 2022 subset*

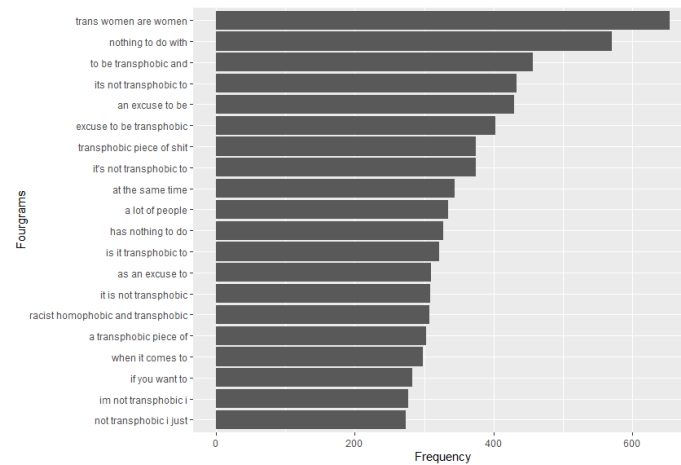***Figure 6**: Top 20 trigrams in English 2022 subset*

Figure 7*: Top 20 fourgrams in English 2022 subset*
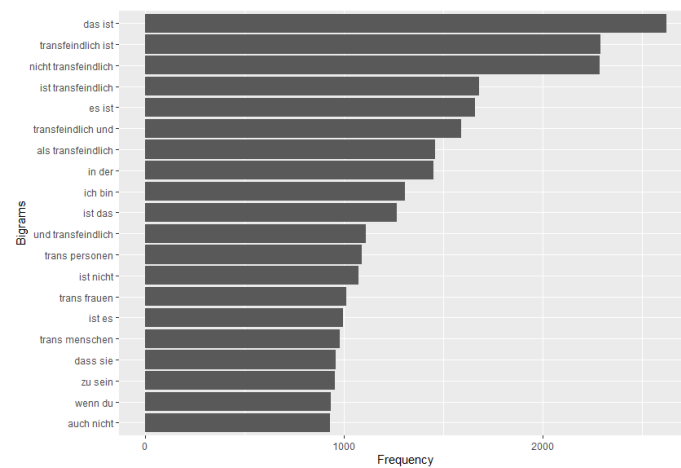

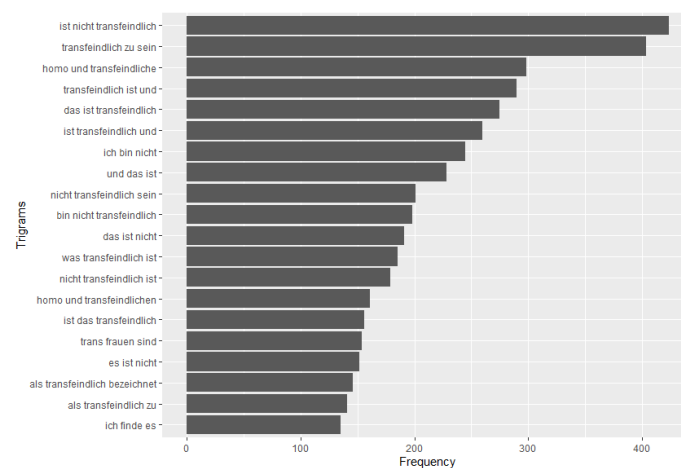***Figure 8****: Top 20 bigrams in German dataset*

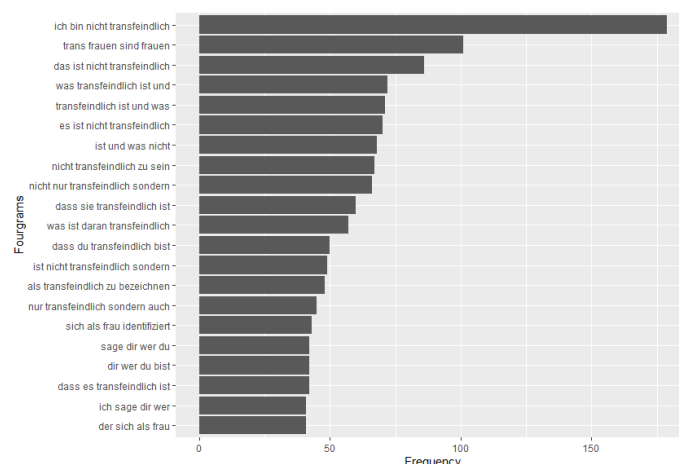***Figure 9****: Top 20 trigrams in German dataset*

Figure 10: Top 20 fourgrams in German dataset

Contextualization

The n-gram analysis shows that *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* are often used in coordination with other words that describe discrimination. Among the English trigrams and fourgrams, there are several that include either *homophobic* or *racist* or both, coordinated with *transphobic*. The bigram consisting of *homophobic* and *transphobic* is also frequently used. In German, we find *homo- und transfeindliche(n)* among the frequent trigrams.

A frequent fourgram in the German tweets is *nicht nur transfeindlich sondern* 'not only transphobic but', which is part of the lexicogrammatical pattern *X ist nicht nur transfeindlich sondern (auch) Y* 'X is not only transphobic but (also) Y'. In the tweets, the second slot of the pattern is mostly filled with other words describing discrimination, for example *racist*, *misogynist*, *sexist*, *homophobic*, *interphobic*, *biphobic*, *lesbophobic*, *ableist*, *antisemitic*, or *classist*. In addition, we find political positions such as *antifeminist* or *right-wing*, but also descriptions of negative behavior, such as *intrusive*, *offending* or *paternalistic*, or very general negative evaluations, such as *falsch* 'wrong', *schlicht scheiße* 'simply shit' or *auf ganz vielen anderen Ebenen scheiße* 'shit on a lot of other levels'.

While *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* can be seen as inherently negative evaluative lexis, as they describe behavior and attitudes that are usually considered negative and sanctionable, the above examples suggest that this negative evaluation is often supported by the linguistic context.

Acts of exemplification

The phrase *das ist transfeindlich* 'this is transphobic' is the top 5 trigram in the German tweets. Using this phrase is an act of exemplification, but Twitter users do a lot more with the phrase, which goes beyond simple exemplification. The phrase is often uttered in direct response to a tweet, where it can be regarded as an accusation of transphobia, but it is also often part of an explanation why an action or utterance at some place in the

preceding conversation or somewhere outside of the Twitter conversation is considered transphobic.

What is most striking is that around a quarter of the uses of *das ist transfeindlich* are metapragmatic, in that they are used in commenting on or discussing the use of *das ist transfeindlich* itself, thus judging the 'appropriateness of communicative behaviour' (Hyland, 2017, p. 17). Many of these uses are sarcastic and mock trans people and activists (Example (2)), others are parts of complaints about being accused (Example (3)). These uses can be analyzed as a kind of double-voicing, which is when 'people appropriate and recontextualize social voices from different sources, often modified to fit their own occasions and aims' (Androutsopoulos, 2023, p. 146), and as an implicit positioning against these voices. Androutsopoulos identifies the 'indignation mark', which is 'a variable combination of graphs that usually includes two or more tokens of the exclamation mark <!>and the digit <1>, thus yielding tokens such as <!1!!>, <!!11!>, or <!!1!11>' (Androutsopoulos, 2023, p. 143) as a marker of double-voicing or other-voicedness. Example (3) shows a use of the indignation mark to mark double-voicing on *das ist transfeindlich*. Other graphic cues of double-voicing that Androutsopoulos (2023, p. 147) has identified are also present in the metapragmatic uses of *das ist transfeindlich*, for example quotation marks (Example (3)) and 'camel case', 'a technique of alternating upper- and lower-case letters within a word or phrase, generally understood as indexing an unreliable voice' (Androutsopoulos, 2023, p. 149), as in Example (2).

(2) @User Nein, das ist TrAnSfEinDliCh... 🙄

('@User No, this is TrAnSpHoBiC… 🙄')[7]

(3) Betrug wird mit: "Sag das nicht. Das ist transfeindlich!!11!!!" vom Tisch gefeudelt.
('Fraud is dismissed with: "Don't say that. This is transphobic!!11!!!"')

There are also metapragmatic uses by trans people and activists, which discuss the use of *das ist transfeindlich*, as in Examples (4)–(6). In such tweets, the users describe specific or typical interactions that occur when they call out transphobia. One of the typical reactions is calling the transphobic nature of the action in question.

(4) Trans Menschen: "Das ist transfeindlich!"
Cis Menschen: "Das soll transfeindlich sein. Stimmt das?" 🤔🤔🤔🤔
('Trans people: "this is transphobic!" Cis people: "This is supposed to be transphobic. Is that true?" 🤔🤔🤔🤔')

(5) @User Besonders, wenn es immer so abläuft: "Das ist transfeindlich" "Wieso?" *erklärt* "Aber das sehe ich anders"
('@User Especially when it's always like this: "This is transphobic" "Why?" *explains* "But I have a different view on this"')

(6) Und wie es sich miteinander vereinbaren lässt, einerseits zu behaupten "Das ist transfeindlich!" sei eine Beleidigung und würde Hass schüren, aber oben

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7   This example and all the following examples are from the Twitter datasets described in the data and methodology section. Handles of the users mentioned in the tweets have been anonymized.

genannten Tweet dann zu retweeten, erschließt sich mir persönlich ja auch nicht. 😉

('And I don't understand how you can reconcile claiming, on the one hand, that "This is transphobic" is a slur and stokes anger, but then retweeting the tweet mentioned above')

The corresponding English phrase *this is transphobic* is not as frequent as the German counterpart but is still on rank 24 of the English trigrams. Again, it is remarkable that 42% of the tweets containing this trigram show metapragmatic and/or ironic uses of *this is transphobic*.[8] Many of these uses (22%) question the transphobic nature of an action, a tweet or some other content. In many of them, the user asks a specific user or other users in general to explain why something is transphobic, often uttered in combination with signaling genuine interest and displaying a lack of understanding (Example (7)). In other tweets the users display uncertainty with phrases such as *I'm not sure* or *I can't tell*.

(7) Can someone explain how this is transphobic? Genuinely asking, I don't understand.

In other metapragmatic tweets *this is transphobic* is presented as a statement that is inappropriately put forward (*somehow/apparently this is transphobic*), meaningless (Example (8)), and linked to "woke" Zeitgeist (Examples (9) and (10)).

(8) Hey @User somehow this is transphobic now because words don't have meanings any more

(9) men can wear skirts and women can have short hair, but 2022 wokeism will tell you that this is transphobic

(10)　　@User Great points, but sadly in todays world people are going to say this is transphobic

Similar to the German *das ist transfeindlich*, the English phrase is also found in many tweets by trans people and activists, discussing specific and typical reactions to calling out transphobia (Examples (11) and (12)) and proposing appropriate reactions (Example (13)).

(11)　　@User Trans person: This is transphobic
Cis person, unperturbed: I thought about it and actually it's not, thanks though

(12)　　I try to start simple and just say "this is transphobic and it hurts people" and let em choose their own adventure in their response. I give that opportunity for them to ask questions n be open minded if theyre ignorant, but the chances are low. Yeah my heart is sad rn.

8　　38% of the tweets use *this is transphobic* as a genuine act of exemplification and accusation of transphobia.

11% of the tweets could not be categorized because the tweet itself or the surrounding tweets were not accessible anymore, therefore the context needed to understand what the user was doing was missing. 9% of the tweets were excluded because they did include the string *this is transphobic* but did not match the pattern (e.g. *the artist who made this is transphobic*).

(13)   @User @User Cis people,even queer cis people, even clever queer cis
writers, do not get to decide what is or isn't transphobic. If trans people are saying
"this is transphobic," believe them. They know what they are talking about.

A remarkable number (23%) of the uses of *this is transphobic* are ironic uses. Some of
them are mocking trans people's and activist's usage of the phrase. Sometimes, this is not
noticeable without further context (preceding and following tweets, profile of the user),
as in Example (14), which imitates a typical callout of transphobia (the phrase *Do better* is
often used in genuine callouts) but is not sincere. We also find cues of double-voicing
again, such as quotation marks (Example (15)) and camel case (Example (16)).

(14)   @User @User @User @User Men can get pregnant too.
This is transphobic.
Do better!

(15)   Anxiously awaiting the first "this is transphobic because trans👏 women 👏
are 👏women👏"

(16)   @User @User @User They wouldn't use that reason if they were part of
the intersectionals. It would just be "ThIS Is tRANspHObIc."
Unless I'm reading you're tweet wrong.

The large majority of the ironic uses, however, are by trans people and used in com-
pletely different contexts, as in Examples (17)–(23).

(17)   why is hrt like the only thing you cannot set up an appointment for online,
this is transphobic /j

(18)   It's cold and rainy outside and I'm not being cuddled and THIS IS
TRANSPHOBIC.

(19)   it is hot outside this is transphobic

(20)   My weekend hasn't started yet, this is transphobic

(21)   hyvee changed their floor plan so i can't find fruit cups. this is transphobic

(22)   animal crossing having super mario promo items with no waluigi. this is
transphobic

(23)   When you hear trans people make "this is transphobic" jokes and
completely don't understand the joke.

These tweets all share a pattern: they describe an unpleasant situation and end with
the evaluation *this is transphobic*. Some of the situations are situations that trans people
have to deal with, for example setting up appointments for hormone replacement therapy
(hrt) (Example (17)), but even in these cases the phrase is used jokingly. These tweets are
often specifically marked as jokes by adding */j* at the end of the tweet. In most of the
tweets, the situation described is just a very general and often also seemingly irrelevant
unpleasant situation, such as the weather (Examples (18) and (19)), having to work (Ex-
ample (20)), a changed floor plan in a supermarket (Example (21)) or missing items in
computer games (Example (22)). This practice among trans people is also metapragmatic-
ally addressed in one of the tweets (Example (23)). Tweets of this kind do not occur in the

German data, so this seems to be a practice that is restricted to English speaking communities on Twitter.

Denial

Many of the patterns evident in the frequent tri- and fourgrams are used in denials. In the German tweets, *Ich bin nicht transfeindlich* 'I am not transphobic' is by far the most frequent fourgram. The English equivalent *I'm not transphobic* appears in the trigrams, since the pronoun and the clitic were not separated into two tokens in the analysis. It appears more than 1000 times and would thus be the most frequent fourgram if *I* and *'m* were considered separate tokens. It is thus similarly prominent as its German equivalent. Almost half of the uses of German *Ich bin nicht transfeindlich* (45.66%) are metapragmatic uses. Here, we also find the markers of double-voicing, such as the indignation mark "!1!" and quotation marks in Example (24) and camel case in Example (25). Furthermore, many of the metapragmatic uses include *aber* 'but' at the end of the pattern (as in Example (24)), which has been described by Geyer, Bick and Kleene (2022) as an essential part of a similar pattern used in denials of racism, which they call the *I'm no racist, but...* construction.

(24)   @User @User @User „Ich bin nicht transfeindlich, aber...!1!"
        ('@User @User @User "I am not transphobic, but…!1!"')

(25)   iCh bIn NiCht trAnSfeInDlicH Sagte er, nachdem er trans als psychische Krankheit bezeichnet hatte
        ('I aM nOt trAnSpHoBiC he said after calling trans a mental illness')

The same observations can be made for the English phrase *I'm not transphobic*. Around half of the uses of this phrase are metapragmatic. Camel case is not found as a marker of double-voicing in the English tweets, but quotation marks are very frequently used. Also, most of the metapragmatic uses include *but* at the end, and some of them also further describe that *I'm not transphobic* is typically followed by transphobic content, thus displaying knowledge of a *I'm not transphobic, but...* construction (s. Examples (26) and (27)).

(26)   In before "I'm not transphobic BUTTTTT" <insert transphobic nonsense here>

(27)   @User I'm not transphobic (transphobic statement)

Further patterns in the German n-grams that are used in denials are *das ist nicht transfeindlich* 'this is not transphobic', *es ist nicht transfeindlich* 'it's not transphobic', *X ist nicht transfeindlich sondern Y* 'X is not transphobic but Y' and the question *Was ist daran transfeindlich?* 'What is transphobic about that?'. In the English data, the patterns *X is not transphobic* and *it's not transphobic to X* are also used in denials.

Other metalinguistic or metapragmatic comments

Finally, some patterns that are used for other metalinguistic or metapragmatic comments can be identified in the frequent n-grams. For example, *dass es transfeindlich ist* 'that it is transphobic' is often used in indirect speech (*die Aussage, dass es transfeindlich ist* 'the statement that it is transphobic' or *Ich hab gesagt, dass es transfeindlich ist* 'I said that it is transphobic'). Furthermore, the fourgram *als transfeindlich zu bezeichnen* 'to call transphobic' is frequently used. It is always part of metapragmatic comments about whether calling someone or something transphobic is justified, as in Examples (28) — which is about buying the computer game *Hogwarts Legacy* and thus supporting J.K. Rowling's transphobic views — and (29), or about what type of speech act it is to call someone or something transphobic, as in Example (30). A similar pattern, e.g. *to call X transphobic* does not appear in the most frequent English n-grams, which does not mean that it does not appear at all in the English data.

(28)   Aber alle die sich EINMAL das Spiel kaufen dann als transfeindlich zu bezeichnen geht halt zu weit.
('But it goes too far to call everyone transphobic who buys the game ONCE')

(29)   Einen Tweet ohne das Wort Trans als transfeindlich zu bezeichnen ist schon heftig.
('It's gross to call a tweet that does not include the word trans transphobic')

(30)   Und so ein Verhalten als transfeindlich zu bezeichnen ist keine Beleidigung, sonder eine Benennung von Fakten.
('And it's not an insult to call such a behavior transphobic, but it is a description of facts')

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the socio-political keywords *transphobic* and *transfeindlich*, with a focus on their usage frequency in news discourse and semantic struggles around them on Twitter. After arguing for their keyword status based on five properties proposed by Durant (2008), I investigated changes in the words' usage frequencies in news corpora and compared these to the usage frequencies of the synonyms *trans-hostile* in English and *transphob* in German. Both words started to appear in news discourse around the year 2010, began to rise in frequency from 2015 on and became decidedly more frequent from 2021 on, which confirms the results of a study by Baker (2019). In the English data, a small peak in 2015 can be observed, which could be explained by the US cultural phenomenon of the 'Transgender Tipping Point' (Richardson & Smith, 2022). In the German news discourse, there is competition between *transfeindlich* and *transphob*, in which *transfeindlich* has only become the more frequently used variant in 2022, while in English the alternative *trans-hostile* is basically non-existing.

In the second study in this paper, I have revealed discourse patterns with *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* used on the social media platform Twitter, which emerge from an ana-

lysis of bigrams, trigrams and fourgrams, and have identified strategies of negotiating the meaning of *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* evident in these discourse patterns. The results of my analysis show, first, that *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* are often used in contexts which support their negative evaluation and, second, that the discourse that includes the word is largely metalinguistic and metapragmatic, centering around the words, their meaning and their usage. Many of the metapragmatic patterns with *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* are also frequently used in double-voicing, which is used as a means of implicit positioning. Apart from the metapragmatic uses, some of the patterns are used in acts of exemplification, and many patterns are applied in acts of denial, such as *I'm not transphobic* or *Ich bin nicht transfeindlich*.

The prevalence of metapragmatic uses is indicative of the semantic struggle around the word *transphobic*, but also of conflict surrounding the practice of describing discrimination. It is especially striking that the phrases *das ist transfeindlich* and *this is transphobic* are not solely used in accusations of transphobia and hence acts of exemplification (where they qualify someone or something as transphobic) but are very often used in metapragmatic debates about the action of describing something or someone as transphobic or to typify people who do this. In other words, many of the tweets containing these phrases are not about the denotative meaning of *transfeindlich* and *transphobic*, but about who uses the phrases and why, hence about pragmatics, stance and indexicality. The semantic struggles around *transfeindlich* and *transphobic* are thus largely pragmatic and social struggles, related to discourses around 'gender ideology' (Borba, 2022; Mayer & Sauer, 2017; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017; Zahn & Lünenborg, 2024; Zottola & Borba, 2022).

As suggested by Heritage's (2022) research in gaming communities, my results also indicate that transphobic behavior is often addressed in online interaction, which differs from what has been found in conversation analytic research on prejudicial talk, where e.g. racist or sexist talk is rarely oriented to or explicitly labeled by interactants (Speer, 2015). It has to be kept in mind, however, that my study is limited to tweets in which *transphobic* and *transfeindlich* are used, which means that I cannot state how often transphobic behavior remains without a response.

While these observations concern both the English and German Twitter discourses, some differences can be observed. For example, the pattern *this is transphobic* is not as frequent as the German counterpart *das ist transfeindlich*, but only in English tweets this phrase is used ironically by trans people, where they describe an ordinary unpleasant situation, such as bad weather, and end with the evaluation *this is transphobic*. Overall, however, the patterns and strategies used are very similar in both languages.

Some limitations of this study concern the data selection and the methods of analysis. The German Twitter analysis is restricted to *transfeindlich*, even though *transphob* had been the more frequent variant in news discourse until 2022. Further research on potential differences in usage between these two words, apart from changing frequencies, is needed. Furthermore, the Twitter datasets that were analyzed are not completely comparable, as the German data included all the tweets available at the time of collection,

while the English data is restricted to March and September 2022. An extension of the analysis to the complete English data might reveal slightly different results. Finally, the strategy of contextualization might have been better identified by a collocation analysis, which can reveal further associated words used in the context of *transphobic* and *transfeindlich*.

Acknowledgements

I thank the organizers of this issue and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

Competing interests

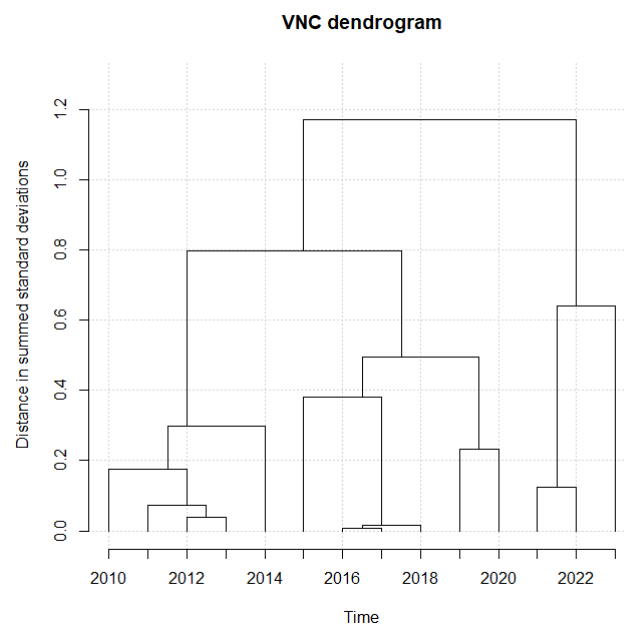The author has no competing interests to declare.

Appendix
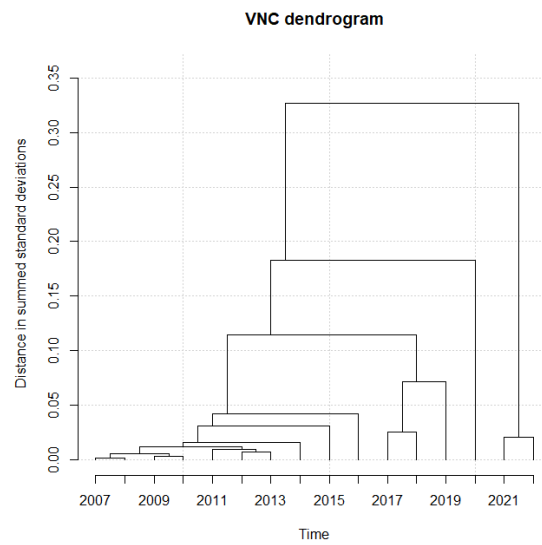

Figure 11: *VNC dendogram for* transphobic *in NOW corpus*

VNC dendrogram

Figure 12: VNC dendogram for transphob *in DeReKo*
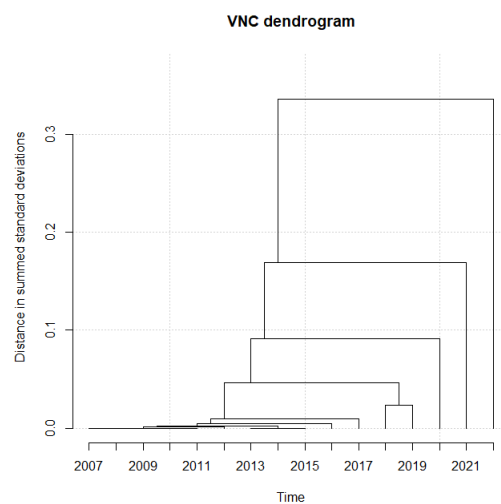
VNC dendrogram

Figure 13: VNC dendogram for transfeindlich in DeReKo

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