

# Democracy and Uncertainty

## Approaching a Heuristic Framework for Studying Political Discourse in the Weimar Republic

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I will discuss methodological challenges and considerations in the early stages of a research project on political discourse in the Weimar Republic.<sup>1</sup> The project focuses on heterogeneous perceptions and definitions of democracy as visible in Weimar's newspapers. I will problematize that text mining might seem particularly helpful for coping with the textual masses of this serial primary source. However, primarily quantitative approaches tend to neglect essential political and social contexts, thus omitting what stands behind the concrete formulations on the text surface. On the other hand, purely qualitative examination tends to be too selective to scrutinize discourse at scale. Therefore, I will outline a framework of scalable reading: The alternating movement of zooming into the close reading perspective and zooming out to the large-scale level. My strategy is, at its core, qualitative, but it introduces quantitative explorations in an overall framework of methodological triangulation. This is inspired by other studies of scalable reading in contemporary history, whose approaches must be adapted to do justice to the specific conditions of Weimar's complex political culture. I will outline my considerations and a proposal for scalable reading, which enters largely uncharted terrain in historical research on Germany's first democracy.

Keywords: Weimar Republic, democracy, discourse analysis, scalable reading, methodology

### 1. Introduction: How to trace political discourse with digital methods?

#### *1.1. Research interest: Weimar's multiple meanings of democracy*

One hundred years after the Weimar Republic, historians have rejected the one-sidedness of the crisis narrative to explain Germany's political development and tragic fate between the World Wars. For about two decades, they still consider Weimar a highly contested republic<sup>2</sup>, but they have increasingly embraced the idea of contingent history<sup>3</sup>, emphasizing open opportunities for the republic's stability and

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<sup>1</sup> While this paper focuses on methodological considerations during the project's onset, I have reported on the project more extensively and with special regard to pro-democratic discourse here: Christian Wachter [in press], Capturing Discourse through the Digital Lens: Towards a Framework for the Analysis of Pro-Democratic Discourse in the Weimar Republic, in: Florentina Armaselu / Andreas Fickers (eds.), *Zoomland: Exploring Scale in Digital History and Humanities*, Berlin 2023 (Studies in Digital History and Hermeneutics, 7).

<sup>2</sup> Ursula Büttner, *Weimar: Die überforderte Republik 1918–1933: Leistung und Versagen in Staat, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft und Kultur*, Stuttgart 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Franka Maubach, *Weimar (nicht) vom Ende her denken: Ein skeptischer Ausblick auf das Gründungsjubiläum 2019*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 68 (2018) pp. 18–20, here pp. 4–9; Moritz Föllmer / Rüdiger Graf (eds.), *Die »Krise« der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters*, Frankfurt am Main 2005.

the development of its political culture.<sup>4</sup> The perspective has shifted from well-examined anti-democratic thinking to consider more pro-democratic mentalities.<sup>5</sup> Up to this day, however, defenders of the Weimar Republic have still received less attention than their political rivals, which calls for more research in that area.

Discourse studies are a particularly prolific field in this respect because, on the one hand, discourses represent political ideas. On the other hand, and in the Foucauldian sense, they shape people's perceptions and opinions and thus impact (political) reality. Moreover, this transformative potential touches on the power dimension of discourses: Shaping people's perceptions of reality often strengthens certain stakeholders and institutions, and it weakens (potential) alternatives and opponents. For studies on interwar Germany, democracy itself is an essential discourse subject. In a fragmented and polarized society, many actors of different political orientations battled over competing definitions, even within the social milieu. After the loss of the First World War and its heavy aftermaths in terms of political, economic, and social hardships, there was no overarching consensus on what a democratic culture and form of government should look like. Liberal parliamentarism, a council system, and even far-right conceptions of a 'democratic' hierarchical state with a sovereign 'Führer' at its top competed with each other. The battle over the republic and the meaning of democracy continued, in different intensity and forms, over the course of Weimar's fourteen years of existence. Thus, democracy presents itself as a polysemic and, in that sense, uncertain entity.

### *1.2. Methodological challenges I: Looking beneath the text surface*

Subsequently, democracy discourses are also elusive and, in that sense, uncertain research objects. Specific terms such as 'democracy', 'republic', and 'people's state', or concrete formulations on the phrase level do not necessarily directly reflect the underlying experiences, perceptions, hopes, expectations, and meaning attribution, which are at the core of discourse studies.<sup>6</sup> Indirect references, coded language, neologisms, irony, etc. omit what is under scrutiny. Furthermore, discourse analysis is usually interested in statements not been uttered at all and why this is the case.<sup>7</sup> When primary source texts refrain from a particular phrasing or ignore a specific topic, it might point to different things, for instance, censorship.

In her study on the normalization of contemporary far-right discourse, Ruth Wodak points out that many populists operate on the verge of the sayable: Ambivalent messages "require great efforts in terms of argumentation and legitimation strategies, which always have to accommodate the routinely sayable and unsayable in a specific context"<sup>8</sup>. Identifying what was sayable and unsayable means bringing to light important information on the rules of political and social discourses.<sup>9</sup>

While large-scale digital analysis promises to cover many primary sources and thus broader discursive spaces, it is this very tendency of discourses to elude the text surface that spurred warnings about the pitfalls of text mining. Amelie Kutter pointed out that corpus analysis does not help us much to reveal the (social, political, etc.) context of a statement's meaning. She claims that corpus analysis does not replace thorough interpretation "[p]recisely because of its selective focus on the distributional properties

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<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Hardtwig (ed.), *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1939*, Göttingen 2005 (Geschichte und Gesellschaft, 21).

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik*, München 1962; Christoph Gusy (ed.), *Demokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik*, Baden-Baden 2000 (Interdisziplinäre Studien zu Recht und Staat, 16).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Thomas Mergel, *Führer, Volksgemeinschaft und Maschine: Politische Erwartungsstrukturen in der Weimarer Republik und dem Nationalsozialismus 1918–1936*, in: Hardtwig (ed.), *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit*, pp. 91–127.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Amelie Kutter, *Corpus Analysis*, in: Ruth Wodak / Bernhard Forchtner (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*, Milton Park 2017, pp. 169–186, here p. 172.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*, second ed., Los Angeles 2021, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> Willibald Steinmetz, *Das Sagbare und das Machbare: Zum Wandel politischer Handlungsspielräume – England 1780–1867*, Stuttgart 1993 (Sprache und Geschichte, 21).

of words.”<sup>10</sup> This is true for an array of techniques such as topic modeling or comparative approaches towards corpora. For example, Textometry<sup>11</sup> and SCoT<sup>12</sup> are specialized in comparing texts and corpora to trace the evolving meaning of terms, while taking any underrepresentation of words and phrases into account. Diachronic collocation analysis, as enabled by tools like DiaCollo<sup>13</sup>, lets scholars explore word meaning shifts over time. Word embeddings have been utilized for similar purposes.<sup>14</sup> Such tools and methods have great value, especially for exploring discourses circling around particular names. However, they are still blind to what is not traceable on the text surface. Therefore, Kutter frames corpus analysis as an “explorative technique for heuristic and reflexive purposes”<sup>15</sup>.

The reflexive value will hardly come as a surprise to most DH scholars. Any quantitative analysis requires thorough interpretation.<sup>16</sup> The heuristic dimension of finding and collecting relevant primary sources, in contrast, bears more potential for reasoning about how to combine distant and close reading. Sarah Oberbichler made an instructive proposal in that respect. Drawing from her studies on anti-migrant discourse in South Tyrol’s contemporary history<sup>17</sup>, Oberbichler outlines a workflow of examining different arguments from newspapers. Here, frequency analyses for already known signal words play a key role in corpus building and analysis (deductive search approach<sup>18</sup>), which leads to a closer look at the most conspicuous occurrences, in order to identify argumentative topoi and discourse topics. Close reading then yields more keywords that enter new iterations of keyword searches (inductive search approach), while methods such as co-occurrence analysis and topic modeling complement this information by finding new keywords for further searches. On this basis and a series of close readings, Oberbichler annotates text passages in Atlas.ti<sup>19</sup> to form a structured network of discourse elements. When visualized, this network provides an overview allowing for thorough interpretation that takes diachronic dimensions and complex references between the discourse contributions into account. In a more recent article, Oberbichler and Eva Pfanzerter pinpoint the potential of such scalable reading approaches to “dig deeper into the historical-critical method in the digital age”<sup>20</sup>. They claim that digitally-assisted heuristics expand the toolset for discourse research because it complements the historian’s experience-based searches with techniques “making the search less influenced by the researcher’s prior knowledge.”<sup>21</sup>

This last remark is instructive to tackle a core problem of my project: Finding relevant newspaper articles traditionally means (1) quantitatively combing through large collections in strenuous close reading or (2) qualitatively reading through articles published in the context of significant events (e.g., elections,

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<sup>10</sup> Kutter, *Corpus Analysis*, p. 184.

<sup>11</sup> TXM: Textométrie, <https://txm.gitpages.huma-num.fr/textometrie/> (05/02/2023).

<sup>12</sup> ACL Anthology: SCoT: Sense Clustering over Time: A Tool for the Analysis of Lexical Change, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18653/v1/2021.eacl-demos.23> (05/02/2023).

<sup>13</sup> CLARIN-D: DiaCollo: Kollokationsanalyse in diachroner Perspektive, <https://www.clarin-d.net/de/kollokationsanalyse-in-diachroner-perspektive> (05/02/2023).

<sup>14</sup> Simon Hengchen et al., A Data-Driven Approach to Studying Changing Vocabularies in Historical Newspaper Collections, in: *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 36 (2021) Supplement\_2, pp. ii109–ii126, <https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqab032>.

<sup>15</sup> Kutter, *Corpus Analysis*, p. 170.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Silke Schwandt, *Digitale Objektivität in der Geschichtswissenschaft? Oder: Kann man finden, was man nicht sucht?*, in: *Rechtsgeschichte. Legal History – Journal of the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory* (2016) 24, pp. 337–338.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Oberbichler, *Argumentationsanalyse von historischen Migrationsdiskursen in Zeitungsberichterstattung mittels Atlas.ti*, in: *Zeitgeschichte* 47 (2020) 4, pp. 467–489.

<sup>18</sup> For a differentiation between deductive and inductive approaches of keyword searches see: Christian Schneijderberg / Oliver Wieczorek / Isabel Steinhardt, *Qualitative und quantitative Inhaltsanalyse: digital und automatisiert: Eine anwendungsorientierte Einführung mit empirischen Beispielen und Softwareanwendungen*, Weinheim 2022 (Standards standardisierter und nichtstandardisierter Sozialforschung), <https://doi.org/10.17170/kobra-202211167131>.

<sup>19</sup> ATLAS.ti: ATLAS.ti, <https://atlasti.com> (05/02/2023).

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Oberbichler / Eva Pfanzerter, *Tracing Discourses in Digital Newspaper Collections*, in: Estelle Bunout / Maud Ehrmann / Frédéric Clavert (eds.), *Digitised Newspapers – A New Eldorado for Historians?*, 2022 (*Studies in Digital History and Hermeneutics*, 3), pp. 125–152, here: 127, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110729214-007>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 147. Here, the authors specifically refer to text mining methods.

political murders, or national commemorations). On these occasions, political discourse lived up, often flamed up, contesting Weimar's political system in fundamental debates. While the first option is only possible in large teams and/or over a long period, the second option is intrinsically blind to 'non-usual' suspects: What has (not) been stated about democracy in relatively calm times of the Weimar Republic is meaningful, too.

### *1.3. Methodological challenges II: Fragmented conservation, partial digitization*

Weimar's newspapers have only partially been preserved, and only a fraction of them has been digitized. This makes it problematic to apply quantitative explorations or to conduct cross-newspaper analyses solely on digital collections. Historians still must confront newspaper articles in archives and, when applying digital methods, manually digitize them. As this would be nearly impossible for purely quantitative analysis, given the vast amounts of relevant issues scattered over various archives, the task is more feasible for qualitative selections. Historians would have to create cross-sections, choosing material from specific dates and focusing on influential newspapers. On the one hand, manual article digitization demands considerable extra effort. On the other hand, this challenge is outweighed, to a certain extent, by gaining flexible searchability within the collected material for later analysis. Scholars benefit from this structured accessibility by receiving more orientation when comparing different text parts and relating them to each other. They thus improve heuristics for both corpus compilation and analysis. Tools for manual digitization have become user-friendly. Nopaque<sup>22</sup>, for instance, provides an easy-to-use toolchain of file setup, Optical Character Recognition, Natural Language Processing, and corpus analysis. This makes the, still laborious, process better manageable.

## **2. Scalable reading Weimar's newspaper discourses on democracy**

Oberbichler's and Pfanzer's notion of digitally enhanced heuristics is inspiring for scrutinizing Weimar's intricate discursive landscape because, so far, many historians have been forced to downsize their research scope to specific political groups, local contexts, or discourse topics due to the sheer mass of primary sources. This is especially true for the analysis of newspapers, which are particularly informative for discourse analysis as they represent Weimar's most important opinion-forming mass media. Prior newspaper studies have focused on big cities and specified questions such as the impact on voting behavior or parliamentarians.<sup>23</sup> Scalable reading promises to broaden this scope and include more discourse contributions to deepen our understanding of political thinking in the Weimar Republic.<sup>24</sup> First of all, however, we must define the theoretical discourse analytic perspective because this has essential consequences for the analysis techniques and annotation schema to be applied.

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<sup>22</sup> Bielefeld University, SFB 1288: Practices of Comparing: nopaque, [https://nopaque.uni-bielefeld.de/\(05/02/2023\)](https://nopaque.uni-bielefeld.de/(05/02/2023)).

<sup>23</sup> Bernhard Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, Oxford 2009. For the Hamburg case see: Karl Christian Führer, *Politische Kultur und Journalismus: Tageszeitungen als politische Akteure in der Krise der Weimarer Republik 1929–1933*, in: *Jahrbuch Für Kommunikationsgeschichte* 10 (2008), pp. 26–51.

<sup>24</sup> A recent master thesis by Giulia de Paduanis is an exception. De Paduanis applies a scalable reading approach with Voyant Tools, focusing on one gazette, the *Aachener Anzeiger*, and analyzing an issue per month. She traces language changes over time, and interprets them in the context of political and societal discourses. Giulia de Paduanis, *Learning from the Past: The Case of the Weimar Republic: A Proposal for Historical Analysis, Revision and Digitization*, Master thesis, Linnaeus University, 2023, [https://lnu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?dswid=3666&faces-redirect=true&language=en&searchType=LIST\\_LATEST&query=&af=%5B%5D&aq=%5B%5B%5D%5D&aq2=%5B%5B%5D%5D&aqe=%5B%5D&pid=diva2%3A1729669&noOfRows=50&sortOrder=author\\_sort\\_asc&sortOrder2=title\\_sort\\_asc&onlyFullText=false&sf=all](https://lnu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?dswid=3666&faces-redirect=true&language=en&searchType=LIST_LATEST&query=&af=%5B%5D&aq=%5B%5B%5D%5D&aq2=%5B%5B%5D%5D&aqe=%5B%5D&pid=diva2%3A1729669&noOfRows=50&sortOrder=author_sort_asc&sortOrder2=title_sort_asc&onlyFullText=false&sf=all). urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-118612 (05/02/2023).

## 2.1. Theoretical precondition for scalable reading: The Discourse-Historical Approach

Oberbichler focused on argumentation strategies and patterns, following the Düsseldorf School of discourse linguistics and the work of Martin Wengeler.<sup>25</sup> For my approach toward Weimar's discursive battles over the meaning of democracy, I consider Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) constructive. This branch of linguistics is engaged, following Kieran O'Halloran, "broadly speaking, with highlighting the traces of cultural and ideological meaning in spoken and written texts."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, CDS is engaged in "how power relations are exercised and negotiated in discourse," as Wodak puts it.<sup>27</sup> This focus on ideology and power fits well with Weimar's newspapers because, all in all, they were driven by strongly opinion-oriented journalism that typically launched polemic attacks on political rivals. Importantly, the main targets were not rival camps on the other side of the political spectrum (e.g., the left attacking the right). Instead, it was primarily the political "neighbors" (e.g., communists attacking social democrats) to be delegitimized, defamed, or disparaged. Weimar's press is a mirror of the polarized and fragmented political landscape, and it battled over discursive power employing a largely ideology-driven language.<sup>28</sup>

As a conceptual concretization, the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) of CDS offers excellent potential.<sup>29</sup> It focuses on longitudinal analyses and combines different theoretical perspectives, methods, and data to 'triangulate' discourses. Within this framework, Martin Reisigl and Wodak define 'discourse' as:

- “- a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action;
- socially constituted and socially constitutive;
- related to a macro-topic;
- linked to argumentation about validity claims, such as truth and normative validity involving several social actors with different points of view.”<sup>30</sup>

The 'validity claims' can be understood in terms of nationalist assertions (e.g., a prominent right-wing topos of Weimar's democracy being alien or "non-German") or an emancipatory language use (e.g., social democrats characterizing federal elections as a means for political participation by the working masses). In this context, discursive legitimation practices become pertinent, for which Theo van Leeuwen developed a universal typology.<sup>31</sup> As four "core types of legitimation strategies," he defines:

- (1) Authorization: Legitimation by referring to the authority of laws, traditions, persons, etc.
- (2) Moral evaluation: Legitimation by referring to value discourses.
- (3) Rationalization: Legitimation by reference "to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity."
- (4) Mythopoesis: Legitimation by narratives, which define what actions are to reward and which are to punish.

Obviously, the four 'core types' rarely appear in pure form. As an analytical scaffold, however, they can guide the analysis of Weimar's democracy discourses because the legitimation types constitute substantial criteria for an annotation schema.

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Wengeler, *Topos und Diskurs: Begründung einer argumentationsanalytischen Methode und ihre Anwendung auf den Migrationsdiskurs (1960–1985)*, Tübingen 2003 (Reihe Germanistische Linguistik, 244).

<sup>26</sup> Kieran O'Halloran, *Critical Discourse Analysis and Language Cognition*, Edinburgh 2003, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Wodak, *Disorders of Discourse*, London 1996 (Real language series), p. 18. [emphasis in the original text]

<sup>28</sup> A concise résumé of this situation is provided by Ute Daniel, *Politische Sprache und Medien*, in: Andreas Wirsching/Berthold Kohler / Ulrich Wilhelm (eds.), *Weimarer Verhältnisse?*, Ditzingen 2018, pp. 51–63.

<sup>29</sup> Markus Rheindorf, *The Discourse-Historical Approach: Methodological Innovation and Triangulation*, in: Ruth Wodak / Markus Rheindorf (eds.), *Identity Politics Past and Present*, Exeter 2022, pp. 45–75.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Reisigl / Ruth Wodak, *The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)*, in: id. / Michael Meyer (eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, Los Angeles 2016, pp. 23–61, here: p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Theo van Leeuwen, *Legitimation in Discourse and Communication*, in: *Discourse & Communication* 1 (2007) 1, pp. 91–112.

## 2.2. Tracing, collecting, overviewing: Scalable reading as heuristics

The scalable reading framework for my project is about identifying, collecting, and structuring newspaper articles in terms of digitally-assisted heuristics. The observations and considerations above have led me to the following outline:

### 2.2.1. Data management plan

Data management is the fundament for data organization, documentation, and publishing. Tools such as Research Data Management Organiser (RDMO)<sup>32</sup> support data management that respects the FAIR principles.

### 2.2.2. Triangulation I: Corpus compilation

Research on Weimar's political culture has been engaged with discursive topics and topoi for a long time. For instance, pro-republicans promoted 'Liberalismus', 'Parlamentarismus', 'Demokratie', 'Demokratisierung' ('democratization'), 'Sozialismus', or the dichotomic figure 'Demokratie oder Diktatur' ('democracy or dictatorship'). There were also the topoi of 'Partizipation' and 'Diktatur der Massen' ('dictatorship of the masses'), or racial notions of 'Volksstaat' ('people's state'), to mention just a few more examples.<sup>33</sup> These expressions mark concepts of democracy, they were taken up as counter-concepts against political opponents, or they were used pejoratively to discredit political rivals.

They function as search terms, for which the Deutsches Zeitungsportal<sup>34</sup> is the primary address, since the growing stock of Weimar's digitized newspapers is mainly accessible here. Newspaper articles identified by the keyword searches are then integrated into a corpus for later analysis. This practice must be complemented by manually searching, closely reading, and digitizing articles from archives because, as mentioned above, the word level alone is insufficient to trace discourse and too few newspapers of the Weimar era have been digitized. Manual selections are possible, for instance, by paying attention to events of political relevance. These qualitative searches might reveal new keywords to enter new search iterations. The overall goal of this procedure is to combine the deductive and inductive approach toward searches. Ultimately, this step marks the beginning of an iterative looping through the texts until no further search loop appears necessary.

### 2.2.3. Triangulation II: Discourse identification, sub-corpora compilation, general annotation

Word frequency analyses of the corpus provide a first glance into discourses of interest. CATMA<sup>35</sup> and its Python Package GitMA<sup>36</sup> are well-qualified tools for this purpose. We can count keyword frequencies and represent them, amongst others, in a distribution chart. Additionally, CATMA counts all the newspapers that contain the keywords. These statistical results enable for a rough overview of occurrences and their temporal distribution. They serve as springboards for close reading of the keyword search findings, which might lead to the identification of new relevant keywords.

Topic modeling, co-occurrence analysis, and other quantitative techniques may now add to the triangulation approach. This part of the project is still under construction, in particular regarding the algorithm type for topic modeling and concrete tools to be applied. While these techniques alone cannot take the relevant socio-political contexts into account, they provide elements of exploration that are independent of the historian's experience, as Oberbichler and Pfanzelter pointed out.<sup>37</sup> This may manifest itself in finding relevant text passages but also in identifying new keywords overseen by prior

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<sup>32</sup> RDMO Arbeitsgemeinschaft: RDMO, <https://rdmorganiser.github.io/> (05/02/2023).

<sup>33</sup> The Literature on such political terms is rich. For a systematic account, see: Thorsten Eitz / Isabelle Engelhardt (eds.), *Diskursgeschichte der Weimarer Republik*, 2 vols., Hildesheim 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek: Deutsches Zeitungsportal, <https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/newspaper> (05/02/2023).

<sup>35</sup> Evelyn Gius et al.: CATMA, <https://catma.de/> (05/02/2023).

<sup>36</sup> Evelyn Gius et al.: GitMA, <https://catma.de/documentation/access-your-project-data/git-access/gitma/> (05/02/2023).

<sup>37</sup> Oberbichler / Pfanzelter, *Tracing Discourses*, p. 147.

research. All newly found keywords of this step should enter further portal searches for corpus extension and new frequency analysis iterations.

The information gained so far can be used to differentiate between keywords for specific discourse topics and topoi. This may address antisemitic rhetoric, defense of parliamentarism, etc. Creating sub-corpora for these topics and topoi by text annotation in CATMA enhances the visibility and findability of relevant statements and thus supports contextualization for later interpretation. This procedure is, again, iterative: Defining specified keywords, close reading of search hits from the entire corpus, and annotating should be repeated until there are no more keywords identified and no new search hits appear.

#### *2.2.4. Structuring Discourses: More detailed annotation and querying of the corpus*

The aim of subsequent close reading is to identify and annotate the discursive strategies and features of the text passages, following the analytic perspective of the DHA. In concrete, this primarily means annotating according to van Leeuwen's (de-)legitimation strategies. Their four 'core types' builds the categorial fundament for an annotation schema. Beyond that, the annotations should reflect the positive, negative, or neutral tone toward democracy. Also, they should cover whether a statement is more or less independent or directly reacts to other statements. All this does not necessarily depend on the exact phrasing in the primary sources, but on relevant semantic contents that need to be detected by means of hermeneutics which takes the temporal, local, political, and socio-cultural context into consideration. Additionally, the article's formal aspects are also relevant annotation features. The gazette's name, publishing date and location are as important as whether we deal with an article of a specific rubric or a reader's letter to the editor.

This structuring work is at the core of the heuristic methodology because it provides an overview and flexible means to (re-)consult text passages in light of later-found discursive contexts. CATMA's query feature picks out text passages based on the user's annotation selections. This heuristic potential is enhanced by visualizations provided by CATMA or external tools<sup>38</sup>, which support quickly zooming out of an individual statement to its context of the whole article.

#### *2.2.5. Source criticism and interpretation*

Thorough source criticism and interpretation are supposed to be better feasible based on the so far structured and visualized annotations. One discourse element can be interpreted in the light of another, and statements of different dates can quickly be compared in diachronic inquiry. Regional comparisons are also possible by respective annotations. Revisiting text passages becomes more manageable, which is relevant when new insights require repeated examination.

### **3. Conclusion and outlook: Pilot studies and reflexive knowledge for contemporary democratic cultures**

Historical discourse analysis is a complex undertaking, given the masses of primary sources that historians must often examine. Discourses are also elusive or uncertain research objects because, in the case of textual analyses, the phrasing on the text surface is usually not decisive and cannot count as the sole anchor for discourse analysis.

The uncertainty increases when we deal with polysemic terms such as 'democracy', which was linked to heterogeneous ideas in Weimar Germany. In this paper, I tried to give some insights from an early stage of my methodological project that addresses research on Weimar's democracy discourses— some considerations of how to tackle that uncertainty and elusiveness methodologically. Drawing from similar approaches in contemporary history research, especially by Oberbichler and Pfanzer, I outlined a framework for scalable reading Weimar's newspapers. The framework had to be geared to interwar Germany's political culture. It is primarily supposed to digitally enhance heuristics by combining quantitative width, context sensitivity, and in-depth insight. This resulted in an overall approach

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<sup>38</sup> The Python package *GitMA* provides git-based access to *CATMA* annotations, which lets users create various visualization types.

characterized by methodological triangulation (combining different approaches to grasp democracy discourses from various angles) and iteration (executing methodological steps not in one fixed order but in repeating loops).

From a methodological perspective, this framework contributes to digitally-assisted discourse studies, dealing with historical newspapers in particular. The outlined steps are laborious, to be sure. But, as I would argue, it is worthwhile applying them because they provide an overview and flexible searchability of many text resources, which makes subsequent analysis easier. As to test and improve the heuristic framework, pilot studies are necessary. As a first pilot study, I am currently analyzing the completely digitized social-democratic *Vorwärts*. This political gazette may be just an individual paper, and social-democratic debates also happened elsewhere. Hence, relying just on one individual newspaper cuts off the broader discursive space. Additionally, projects that mainly analyze what is digitally available may appear as comfortable enterprises. However, since I primarily pursue a methodological project and develop a conceptual framework, this objection seems less relevant. The framework is flexible enough to cover other newspapers and even other types of writing.

From a historical perspective, I would like to stress the importance of learning more about political ideas and opinions during an essential period of Germany's history of democracy. While it has become clear that historians should emphasize more the long-neglected uniqueness and contingency of Weimar's history, present-rooted interests have not become entirely obsolete. On the contrary, zeitgeist and research foci have always strongly and visibly interdependent, as Ursula Büttner stated.<sup>39</sup> In light of right-wing attacks against present-day democratic institutions and values in various Western countries, we must be careful not to impose modern understandings of democracy upon Weimar Germany and to make overly simplistic comparisons. Looking back at Weimar should not lead to anachronistic thinking, as various historians have publicly warned.<sup>40</sup> However, engaging in historical discourse studies deepens our understanding of possible interpretations of democracy. Complementarily, we gain insights into discursive means of defending democracy, which are always contextually situated. Nevertheless, these inquiries provide reflexive knowledge for developing strategies of countering anti-democratic attacks.

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<sup>39</sup> Ursula Büttner, *Ausgeforscht? Die Weimarer Republik als Gegenstand historischer Forschung*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 68 (2018) 18–20, pp. 19–26, here: 19.

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, the contributions in: Andreas Wirsching/Berthold Kohler/Ulrich Wilhelm (eds.), *Weimarer Verhältnisse?*, Ditzingen 2018.

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