IASS-Blogpost

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[Dachzeile]

We need a new language for reporting on traffic

From "four-year-old runs into car" to "cyclist falls under turning truck" – the wording of police reports and newspaper articles often shifts responsibility for road-related harms away from motorists. This shapes the way we think about road incidents and puts the brakes on an emerging shift in mobility.

As a journalist with German broadcaster recently noted in a report on the language used in police reports on traffic collisions: "Language shapes consciousness." The journalist went on to explain how the language used by the police shifts the blame for road violence away from the car and the driver. And the language used in police reports is often repeated word-for-word by journalists. Their portrayal of events in turn shapes our consciousness and future actions.

But there's more: Language also shapes our perception of problems, opening up or excluding possible courses of action in the process. To name one example, the possibility of assigning blame or responsibility for collisions is determined by language:

"Cyclist crashes into car door and sustains serious head injuries." This headline relates to an incident on Berlin's Wilhelmstraße in Kreuzberg; just around the corner from my apartment. I know this street well and have witnessed first-hand how many motorists sound their horns at cyclists as soon as the latter leave their so-called "protective cycle lane." What the article does not mention, is that the "dooring zone" extends into this cycle lane – if you're not familiar with term, it's the area into which the open door of a parked car protrudes. If you think that's a recipe for disaster, you're not alone. The article describes the incident as follows:

"According to the report, the woman crashed her bicycle into the door of a car parked correctly at the side of the road on Wilhelmstraße, as the 43-year-old driver was about to exit the vehicle. The woman, who was using the bicycle lane, fell to the ground."

This narrative assigns a passive role to the motorist, despite the fact that the motorist's actions (opening the door into the path of another road user) are a key factor in the incident. This narrative does not assign any responsibility to the motorist – who was either not paying attention or acted with reckless disregard for the safety of others. Nor does it entertain the idea that infrastructure and traffic regulations create hazards. And yet, that is precisely the case...

"Collision" or "accident"? Wording frames interpretations and responses

In the United Kingdom and the United States, researchers have written extensively on reporting of traffic collisions and on how language shapes our perceptions of such incidents. This research has also shown that language plays a key role in determining how we determine who is to blame for road harms and what measures could be taken to reduce road violence.

I deliberately use the word "collision" rather than "accident" in this context. The word "accident" can be traced back to the Latin *accidentem* ("unintentional; coming by chance; misfortune") and denotes "something bad that happens that is not expected or intended and that often damages something or injures someone".

Not expected? With an average of three to four thousand people killed on German roads annually over the last decade, collisions and other harms can hardly be described as unexpected. The word "accident" seems fantastically inappropriate considering this and other statistics.

Researchers at the IASS in Potsdam are also studying the language used in discussions around mobility infrastructure. We have found, for example, that the narratives that paved the way for Copenhagen's emergence as Europe's cycling capital were characterized by a focus on safety rather than environmental concerns. And that differentiating between "weaker" (or "vulnerable") and "stronger" road users can help to build public support for the development of infrastructure to protect these "weaker" users.

Some form of guidance for journalists who write about such incidents would be extremely helpful. In the United Kingdom, researchers are preparing to publish a collection of Road Collision Reporting Guidelines. These guidelines suggest that "publishers must not use the term accident when describing road collisions – collision, or crash, are more accurate, especially when the facts of the incident are not known." We could learn a lot from this approach in Germany, where newspapers still regularly print headlines such as "four-year-old runs into car" or "cyclist falls under turning truck".

Nuanced wording could promote uptake of sustainable mobility

If we are going to achieve our emissions-reductions and sustainability goals, we need to transform the mobility sector and change our approach to urban development by shifting the focus away from motor vehicles. Not only would this reduce traffic violence, it would also enable a healthier and more sustainable mobility. Making walking and cycling safe and stress-free should be the goal, no matter whether you're aged four or ninety-four. It's high time for us to embrace sustainable urban mobility and create better, safer, more sustainable and liveable cities for future generation. There is still a long way to go, but one way that we can support this effort and each other is by using the right language.

Unfortunately, I don't have a playbook detailing exactly how we need to talk about urban spaces and mobility so that we can get through this transformation together – but I can offer a few suggestions. It is clear that language really does matter in this context. Researchers have shown that it can make a huge difference whether we talk about mobility or traffic, for example, or about car traffic as opposed to velomobility.

When we start to use more differentiated language to talk about mobility, we pave the way to more sustainable and safe cities because that creates space for new thoughts and inspires people to get involved in efforts to shape better cities.

Occasionally people say to me: "Dirk, since we first talked about mobility, I can't NOT see the way our cities are built to work for cars first and foremost!" This doesn't happen often, but language is a tool that can help us flip this lever on a larger scale. And once that happens, there's no turning back. It's this change in mindset that paves the way towards better cities.

What language is holding us back? In the following, I'll explore a few concepts that I think are particularly important because they anchor our way of thinking in the car-centric city.

I've already pointed out the problem with '**accidents**.' "Crash," "collision" and similar words are better as these make it clear that we, as a society can do something about such incidents. Rather than presenting collisions as a fact of life, this wording draws attention to the fact that they are in fact preventable – if we take action.

I have to admit that I am undecided when it comes to the term "**car-free**," in the sense of "car-free neighbourhoods" or the experiment "car-free Friedrichstraße." This somewhat provocative term can be used to convey an idea or vision for a particular space or to draw attention to an issue. And that can be important. But in and of itself, the term "car-free" describes the absence of something, not a quality of its own. And, what we're actually striving to achieve is to improve the quality of our public spaces. "Lively," "open," "beautiful," "safe, "and "clean" are all adjectives that describe a quality. Of course, "safe" implies the absence of danger, but it is better because it describes a quality that we identify with as positive. For me, at least, "safe" evokes more positive associations than "danger-free."

To make things more concrete, let's consider an alternative to "road closures":

"We should **close the road forever** so that we can play on it every day!" A seven-year-old made this suggestion to me with great enthusiasm when I was supervising a so-called "temporary play street" on Wassertorstraße in Kreuzberg last summer. These temporary play streets were among several prototypes for changing use of public space that we developed together with local authorities and civil society to improve access to public space as the coronavirus pandemic took hold in early 2020. These prototypes were all developed under the title "**Open Streets**" (including the pop-up bike lanes!).

And **open streets** really do capture the mindset behind forward-thinking mobility. To my mind, a street where everything is focused on the needs of one user group – motorists – is a **closed street**, as opposed to one where a whole range of activities can take place: from meeting friends and neighbours to playing sports, hanging out or doing errands – not to forget al fresco dining or street parties!

A closure is something negative: nobody wants to be locked out (or in!). **Open streets** is rich with positive connotations. An opening is something to look forward to – especially in these troubled times.

It is important that we use the right words to describe our vision and give it the right name. So let's **open the roads** instead of closing them.

To take another example: When we talk about "parking spaces," we are suggesting that the space is there for parking. But what is "parking" really? The word "parking" describes an activity: the storing of private property in what are often public spaces. When we store something, we keep it in a place so that we – and usually not others – can use it later.

Normally, I don't or can't simply store my private belongings in a public space – especially if I expect to maintain ownership. Vehicles are pretty much the only exception to this rule. Somehow, it has become normal to store these private belongings in public space. We've even invented a word for this phenomenon that makes it seem both harmless and completely normal: "parking." And to meet the high demand for these free storage facilities, local governments have made it their job to produce and maintain these exclusive areas for the storage of private cars – to the tune of [1,500-5,000€ for the construction of a single parking space](#) and as much as 300€ annually for maintenance.

Here's something you can try at home: Write a short text, 4-5 sentences will do, describing a typical street in your city. Inevitably you'll find that your street is lined with parked vehicles. Now replace the words "parking" and "parking space" with "area where private vehicles are stored in public space almost for free." Does that sound absurd? Perhaps because it is absurd. And we use the word "parking" to conceal this absurdity. The word "parking" prevents us from questioning this phenomenon.

So I'd like to suggest that when we refer to an area for parking private property, we should use a more fitting term: **car storage space**. Sure, it doesn't exactly roll off your tongue at first, but that's the way it is with new terms. Practice makes perfect, right?

Let's try to make language work for us and help us on our way to better cities. Because we need different cities. And that means, we need a new consciousness. And, as we know, language shapes consciousness.

This contribution was originally delivered as a presentation at the KonRad21 conference on 17 April 2021 und has been adapted for the IASS Blog.