Does Security exist outside of the speech act?

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Security Studies and International Relations were traditionally dominated by realist and neo-realist conceptions of security—which privileged the self-interested nation-state and the concept of national security understood in military terms. These objectivist approaches define security in terms of the threat, use and control of military force by state actors (Walt, 1991: 212). Such approaches are based on the assumption that security exists out there independently of the observer (Booth, 2003: 85) in the anarchic international system. In the post Cold War epoch various challenges to Realist approaches to Security Studies arose—which entailed a movement away from objectivism and rationalism, toward more interpretive modes of analysis (Krause & Williams, 2003: 48).

One such challenge was put forth by the Copenhagen School, who sought to broaden the security agenda by conceptualising security within the analytical framework of "securitisation". Securitisation defines security as a social construction, not as an objective condition, but as the outcome of a specific social process. A champion of this framework, Waever (Buzan et al, 1998: 26) regarded security as a "speech act": an utterance which represents and recognises phenomena as "security," thus giving it special status and legitimising extraordinary measures (Buzan et al, 1998: 26).). Within this understanding, the utterance is itself the act (Buzan et al, 1998: 26). Hence, the meaning of security exists within the discourse of security, which identifies a threat and calls for emergency measures. This social constructivist reading of security attempts to broaden the security paradigm by claiming security status for a multitude of issues and referential objects in the economic, environmental and societal realms as well as the military and political ones (Buzan et al, 1998: 1).

This paper will contend that security is a social construction, hence a social fact produced in discursive practices and social interaction. Thus security can only be known in terms of the intersubjective social processes through which it is produced and reproduced. Whilst emphasising that security is the outcome of social processes and that our knowledge of security can be governed by certain discursive formations, this paper will also contend that the speech act methodology is too narrow, inasmuch it reduces social phenomena to certain textual markers and fails to address the materiality of discursive practices and thus the existence of security outside of the speech act. Moreover the Copenhagen School's slender focus on the "speech act" as the central form of communicative action in the construction of security means that it fails to grapple with developments in communicative media and to account the production and reproduction of truth and knowledge through images.

This paper will argue that security does exist outside of the "speech act", by first outlining the theoretical assertions made by the Copenhagen School, and then problematising the definition of security as a speech act in terms of its failure to access the reasons why and how particular phenomena are constructed as security threats in different contexts. An adherence to the speech act framework renders the Copenhagen School unable to contextualise the processes of securitisation and reflects their unwillingness to question the meaning and content of security. Moreover this essay will offer a critique of the "speech act" theory of security by invoking poststructuralist conceptions of the production of truth through discourse and the material effects of such practices. The content of security cannot be understood as fixed, but rather as a multifaceted set of processes whereby the content and nature of security is open to argumentation and dispute and must be contextualised in order to understand the nuances of its construction. In essence, this essay accepts the epistemological assumptions made by Waever et al—namely the social constructedness of security—but problematises the definition of security as a "speech act", on the grounds that it fails to acknowledge the role of physical practices and context in the construction of security.

The Copenhagen School challenged the military-centred and state-centric realist conception of security, through its insistence upon the exploration of the "logic of security itself to discover what differentiates security and the process of securitisation from that which is merely political" (Buzan et al, 1998: 4). Within this critical perspective, security is defined as a "speech act", understood here as a discursive practice which attaches the label of "security" to an issue, thus presenting and dramatising it as being of supreme priority thereby legitimising an agents claim to treat the issue by extraordinary means (Buzan, et al, 1998: 26).

Significant to this theory is Waver's notion of societal security, which invokes community and identity as key analytical tenets. This concept refers to the presentation of community identity being threatened by dynamics such as population movements (Williams, 2003: 513). The emphasis on threat and societal identity—its' sense of we-ness—reflects the Copenhagen School's focus on a particular type of speech act and thus a specific security—one which understands the politics of enmity. The essence of security in this understanding is existential threats and the production of the "other" as a political enemy. Hence, the speech act is a security act and securitisation relies on a specific rhetorical structure which identifies threats, proposes emergency action and effects interunit relations by breaking free of rules (Williams, 2003: 514). Securitisation is structured by the differential capacity of actors to make socially effective claims about threats and accepted as convincing by an audience and by the empirical factors or situation to which these actors can make reference (Williams, 2003: 514). A successful securitising speech act depends on an adherence to the internal linguistic rules of the act and the legitimate positionality of the actor uttering the act. This narrow reading of the construction of security as a designation of threatening 'others' and the legitimation of emergency measures (military) by an elite actor, serves to reify the meaning of security and marginalises inclusive and non-statist definitions of values of security understood in particular contexts (McDonald, 2009: 579).

For the Copenhagen School, security rests upon a symbiotic relationship between actor and audience. Hence, an issue is securitised when an audience accepts it as such. The significance of the audience in the process of securitisation is neatly encapsulated in the concept of intersubjectivity. A successful securitisation is decided by the audience of the speech act; it is they who must accept that something is an existential threat to a shared value (Buzan et al, 1998: 31). Speaking security does not guarantee success; therefore security rests among the subjects and their willingness to accept legitimacy of the discourse. The central problematic of the speech act theory relates to its' casting of securitisation merely in terms of this discourse-legitimation-action sequence.

Problematically, the classic application of the securitisation framework privileges the role of political leaders in the articulation and designation of threat and locates the logic of security among strategic actors imbued with intentionality. Such an image of strategic actors seeking to label threats as security and therefore justify emergency responses provides a narrow state-centric conception of the construction of security which fails to contextualise the processes involved and tackle the meaning of security. Hence, the Copenhagen School's framework of securitisation focus overwhelmingly on the performative role of the speech act rather than the conditions in which securitisation itself becomes possible (Buzan and Waever, 2003: 72). Whilst alluding to the intersubjective nature of security, the focus on the speech act as performing security defines security less as a site of negotiation than one of articulation (McDonald, 2009: 572).

The social construction of security cannot be comprehensively understood in isolation from the role of the audience and the social, political and historical contexts in which particular discourses of security become possible. Thierry Balzacq (2005) supports this essay's view that the securitisation cannot merely be understood as a speech act, inasmuch as he contends that the articulation of security is one part of the securitisation process: it relies upon the acquiescence, consent or support of particular constituencies. Security then involves stages of identification and mobilisation (Paul Roe, 2009: 616), in which the securityness of a threat and the appropriate response to it are negotiated within an interactive process between actors and audiences. Hence security is contextual; different threats are privileged by different communities, particular securitisations are legitimated across time and space according to narratives of history, culture and identity and different voices are empowered or marginalised to define security and threat.

Waever (1995: 57) argues that security is articulated only from a specific place, in an institutional voice, by elites.

This state-centricism serves to marginalise the experiences and articulations of the powerless in global politics. Hansen (2000: 306) postulates that "a focus on speech acts means contributing to the silencing of women, whose suffering and engagement with security discourses is neglected in a framework that focuses on the articulation of the powerful". This focus on dominant voices renders the speech act framework impotent in terms of grappling with the plight of the most vulnerable in world politics—and their experiences of and engagement with security and threat.

This paper's proclivity to a hermeneutic approach to security problematises the decisionistic (Williams, 2003: 521) approach to the 'moment' at which threats are designated. Securitisation does not occur only at particular instances; issues can become institutionalised as security issues or threats without dramatic moments of intervention (Bigo, 2002). Looking 'beyond the moment' of intervention allows one to assess more comprehensively why an actor represents an issue as a threat in a particular context and why a specific constituency accepts it as such. Hence security is not merely that which fulfils the criteria of securitisation (Ciuta, 2009: 303), it does not have an unchanging essence—but rather is the product of historical structures and processes of struggles for power (Lipschutz, 1995: 8) between societal groups with competing interests.

Immigration as a security threat in Europe for example, was the product of long-term processes of institutionalisation and related heavily to the incorporation of immigration within the jurisdiction of security professionals such as the police (Bigo 2000). Moreover, there is no simple dichotomy between the political and security. Such a dichotomy is problematic in that suggests an either/or approach, whereby an issue is either a security threat or a political issue. Immigration in the UK is not seen by all constituencies as a threat to security. For some it is a risk and for others the casting of immigration as a threat is a wholly disputable discourse. Thus, the meaning of security is not fixed within the speech act of an elite group, but rather is open to argumentation and can be questioned on the grounds of truth, rightness and sincerity (Wyn-Jones, 1999: 110).

Security as a speech act frames the concept within communicative action and legitimation— involving a presentation of evidence and a commitment to convincing others of the validity of one's position in a process of justification. A theory so reliant on speech for its' explanatory position fails to address the dynamics of security in a world where political communication is increasingly bound with images and in which televisual communication is an essential communicative medium.

The construction of the terrorist for example in the Bush and Blair discourse post 9/11 is inextricable from the image dominated context in which it takes place and through which meaning is communicated. The nexus between the discursive construction of the terrorist as a deadly threat and televisual imagery working to the same end is emblemised by the construction of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 as "acts of war". Hence one cannot understand Bush's rhetorical move to construct the attacks as unprecedented and new forms of warfare thereby invoking the nation's right to self-defence (Jackson, 2007: 356), without assessing the impact that the extraordinary and repeated images of that act had on reactions to it. Here in lies the fundamental merit and pitfall of the speech act theory. On the one hand it provides us with an innovative understanding of the metaphorical constitution of terrorism in discourse and on the other it remains closed to the impact different mediums of communication have on the securitisation process. Thus, language is only one means through which meaning is communicated (Moller, 2007: 180).

Drawing on Michel Foucault, this essay problematises the reduction by the speech act theory, of securitisation to a purely linguistic rhetoric. The meaning we attach to security and our knowledge of what constitutes security exists within both the material and textual realms, for they are not mutually exclusive. Foucault (1980: 63) holds that once a discursive utterance is considered an action or as a practice, this then begins to verge on the territory of materiality and becomes more easily linked to the array of physical activities through which the diagnosis may be made initially.

To illuminate his concept of discursive practices, Foucault invokes the notion of extra-discursive—which relates to the idea that similar discursive acts can occur in a multitude of ways and various different forms that stretch from the textual to material level of discursive practice. The speech act theory defines security as language—thus language becomes security. Such an over-concentration on language signals a myopia of text, an over-evaluation of the linguistic and representational powers of language in isolation from the material arrangements of power in which they are entrenched and that they in turn extend (Foucault Journal, 2001: 540).

The over-evaluation by the speech act theory of the linguistic powers of language in isolation from the material context of power, in which they are intermeshed, is problematised by the Didier Bigo (2002). Bigo (2002: 65) holds that "security is constructed and applied to different issues and areas through a range of often routinised practices rather than only through speech acts that enable emergency measures". Accordingly, practices of surveillance and border controls for example, can be central to the process of securitisation and are not simply those actions enabled by preceding speech acts (McDonald, 2009: 570). Recognising the role of physical systems in the construction of security, that is, the generation of meaning and the productive power of such systems—demands an acceptance that security exists outside of the speech act. Hence, the speech act framework of security problematically neglects physical action which can serve to communicate ideas about security in their own right (Hansen, 2000: 300-1).

In summation, security is constructed through processes of social interaction, but cannot be defined narrowly as existing only within the speech act. Hence, the definition of security in terms of a discourse-action sequence is problematic, inasmuch as it fails to recognise the complexity of the construction of security in global politics. Assuming that security merely resides within the discursive positioning of threats, neglects the historical and social contexts in which security becomes possible. Thus, discourses of security are bound by the historical and social structures in which they are produced. The speech act then is just one dynamic of the securitisation process, the role of audiences, visual communication and physical practices must all be examined in order to understand how security is experienced in different contexts. Security exists within the interplay between self-identity and the construction of meaning, thus the feeling of threat and being secured is produced within all social structures. Security is what we make of it, different worldviews and discourses bound by social structures and communicated in diverse ways, deliver different discourses about security. Security can be constructed physically through bureaucratic systems, through the discourses of the state and within marginalised groups whose experience of threat and security may not be known or heard. Security therefore is not just a speech act.

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